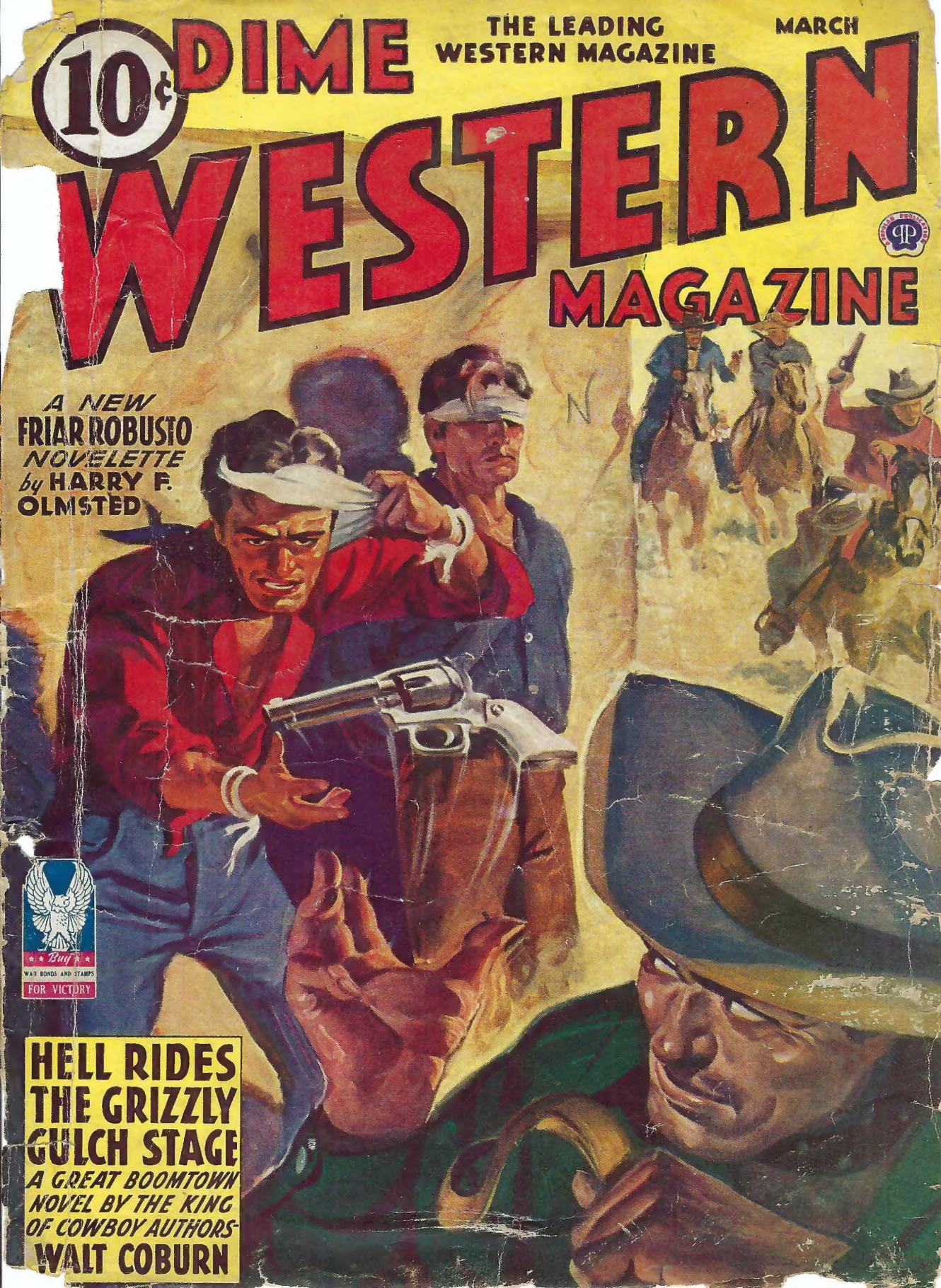
10¢
DIME
THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE
MARCH
WESTERN
MAGAZINE
A NEW FRIAR ROBUSTO NOVELETTE by HARRY F. OLMSTED
WAR BONDS AND STAMPS
FOR VICTORY
HELL RIDES THE GRIZZLY GULCH STAGE
A GREAT BOOMTOWN NOVEL BY THE KING OF COWBOY AUTHORS
WALT COBURN

Drink a Toast to Our Armed Forces

NEW... EXCITINGLY DIFFERENT "DRINKING COMPANIONS"

for Readers of

THIS MAGAZINE

Patrotic . . . Unique . . . SO Different You'll Want to Take Advantage of This Coupon Offer Now While Supplies Are Still Available

Just think! A matched set of six, best-quality, big 10-ounce Victory drinking glasses, and on a coupon offer so amazing it may never be duplicated.

What makes these glasses so amazingly unusual is the full color design, different on each glass, saluting each different branch of our armed forces . . . Army, Navy, Marines, Air Corps, Coast Guard and even the Defense Worker. ALL are "toasted" and honored. There are TWO illustrations on EACH glass. We have illustrated what you see from the front. You'll get a real kick out of the back view, when you turn the glass around. In good taste for young and old. So, readers, accept this coupon offer now, while this special arrangement is on. You'll be glad you did!

No-Nick Chip-Proof Bevel Edge
•
Full 10 Oz.
•
Ideal for Beer, Highballs, Water and Every Beverage

ILLUSTRATION ½ ACTUAL SIZE

IF YOU THINK YOU MUST PAY $3, $4, OR $5 FOR SUCH UNUSUAL GLASSES

Then You'll Be Delighted When You Read the Coupon

SEND NO MONEY JUST MAIL THE COUPON

INSPECT...USE...SHOW YOUR FRIENDS ON THIS NO-RISK OFFER

Be sure to mail your coupon today. When your set of 6 full-color Victory Glasses, toasting our armed forces, reaches you, give postman only $1.49 plus C.O.D. postage. Consider them "on approval." See the excellent quality glass, the perfect shape. Note the safety chip-proof bevel edge. Most important, be happy with the vivid full-color illustrations, different front view and back view, toasting our armed forces. Use your set for 10 days, put them to every test. If you aren't 100% pleased beyond words, return the set and your money will be immediately refunded. Victory Glasses make every party a sure success, are ideal for everyday use, too. Timely, exclusive and such a wonderful coupon value, you'll be delighted. Readers, be the first in your set to Toast Our Armed Forces for Victory! Now, today, mail the coupon.

FREE!

MATCHED COASTER SET

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NO-RISK 10-DAY TRIAL OFFER

Send me a set of 6 big 10-ounce illustrated Victory glasses and the free set of coasters. On arrival I will deposit with postman $1.49 plus postage charges on the iron-clad guarantee that if I am not completely satisfied, I may return the set of glasses and coasters in 10 days for complete refund without question.

☐ MONEY ENCLOSED (If money with order, glasses come postpaid.)

Name .....
(Print Plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

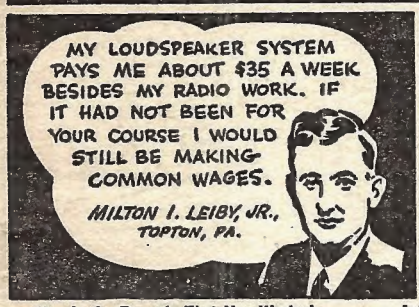
☐ **SPECIAL:** Send me 3 complete sets, with FREE coasters for $3.49. (Due to the demand and our limited supply, only 3 sets may be ordered by one customer.)

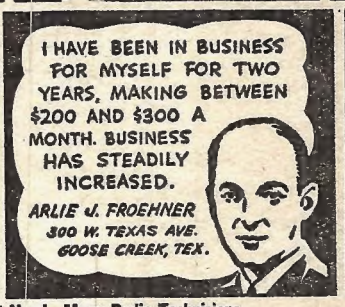
Do You Want Success Like This in RADIO

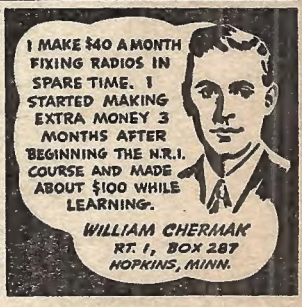
BEFORE COMPLETING YOUR COURSE I OBTAINED MY RADIO BROADCAST OPERATOR'S LICENSE AND IMMEDIATELY JOINED STATION WMPC WHERE I AM NOW CHIEF OPERATOR.
HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 MADISON ST., LAPEER, MICH.

I WAS WORKING IN A GARAGE WHEN I ENROLLED WITH N.R.I. I AM NOW RADIO SERVICE MANAGER FOR M------ FURNITURE CO. FOR THEIR 4 STORES.
JAMES E. RYAN
119 PEBBLE COURT
FALL RIVER, MASS.

CLIPPING YOUR COUPON GOT ME STARTED IN RADIO. I AM NOW IN CHARGE OF THE RADIO DEPARTMENT FOR THE AMERICAN AIRLINES AT CLEVELAND.
WALTER B. MURRAY
AMERICAN AIRLINES, MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, CLEVELAND, OHIO.


MY LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM PAYS ME ABOUT $35 A WEEK BESIDES MY RADIO WORK. IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR YOUR COURSE I WOULD STILL BE MAKING COMMON WAGES.
MILTON I. LEIBY, JR.,
TOPTON, PA.


I HAVE BEEN IN BUSINESS FOR MYSELF FOR TWO YEARS, MAKING BETWEEN $200 AND $300 A MONTH. BUSINESS HAS STEADILY INCREASED.
ARLIE J. FROEHNER
300 W. TEXAS AVE.
GOOSE CREEK, TEX.


I MAKE $40 A MONTH FIXING RADIOS IN SPARE TIME. I STARTED MAKING EXTRA MONEY 3 MONTHS AFTER BEGINNING THE N.R.I. COURSE AND MADE ABOUT $100 WHILE LEARNING.
WILLIAM CHERMAK
RT. 1, BOX 287
HOPKINS, MINN.

Here's the Formula That Has Worked For Hundreds

Mail the Coupon—I will send you my 64-page illustrated Book, RICH REWARDS IN RADIO—a real introduction to the wonders and opportunities of Radio!

You'll see how my thorough, practical methods offer *a tested way to more pay*, and a chance to get a steady job in a field with a bright future. It's not a "miracle cure" nor a "long chance" operation, but the same formula that worked for the men above, and hundreds of others, too. It is a time-tested way to make $5, $10 a week extra while training for a full time Radio job paying up to $50 a week.

Beginners Quickly Learn to Earn $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

Many N.R.I. students make $5, $10 a week EXTRA MONEY fixing Radios in spare time *while learning*. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

N.R.I. trains you "from the ground up"—covers fundamentals thoroughly. The combined efforts of more than 100 people have made the Course so *interesting*, with hundreds of pictures, charts, and diagrams—so *easy-to-grasp*, with special teaching methods—that we believe you will be "old friends" with Radio almost before you know it!

EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

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Today there's room nearly everywhere for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians are starting their own businesses—making $30, $40, $50 a week! Others take good-pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Many more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians, Radio manufacturers employ others to help fill Government wartime orders.

And Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. Then, think of the NEW jobs Television, and other Radio developments will open after the war. I give you the Radio knowledge required for these fields.

Find Out Today What N. R. I. Can Do For You

MAIL THE COUPON NOW for my 64-page book FREE. You'll discover things you never knew about Broadcasting, Radio Servicing, Manufacturing, other Radio fields of opportunity. You'll read a description of my Course, Extra Money Job Sheets. You'll see letters from many men I trained telling what they're doing, earning. Mail Coupon AT ONCE! **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3CS9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Training Men For Vital Radio Jobs

I Trained These Men at Home *I Will Train You Too*

THIS **FREE** BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3CS9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book, RICH REWARDS IN RADIO. (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

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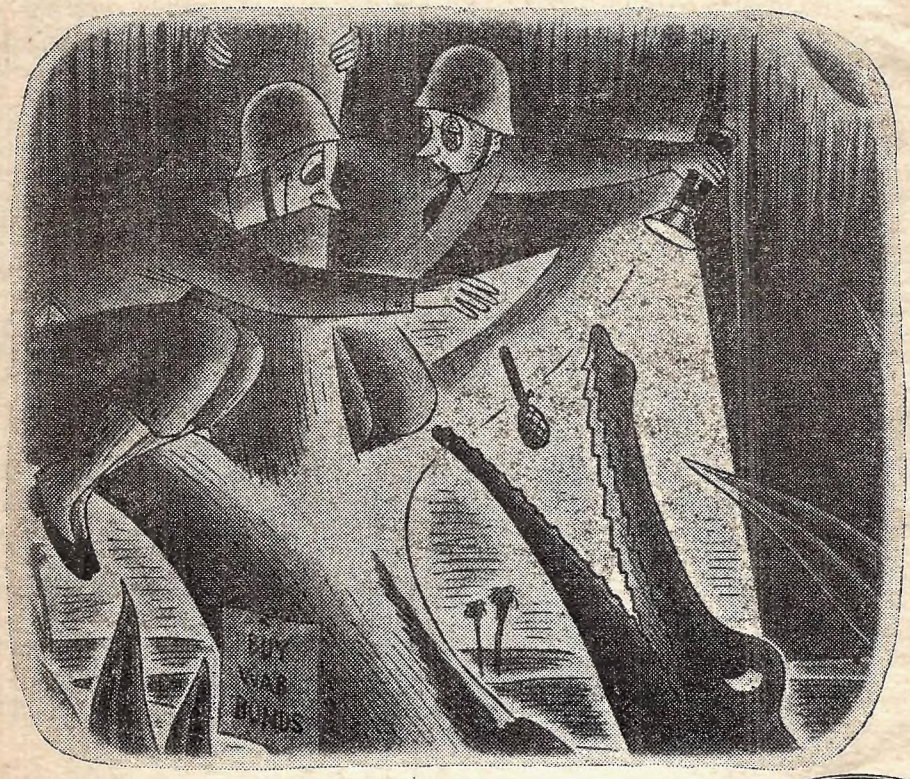
Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries



"Normally I'd consider this a dirty trick"

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER . . . Look for the date line →

REMEMBER—our fighting forces need "Eveready" flashlights and batteries and the materials they are made from. You can serve by conserving yours!

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★ THE WORLD'S LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE ★

10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

APRIL ISSUE PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 26th!

VOLUME XXXV | March, 1943 | NUMBER 3

Complete Western Novel

Hell Rides the Grizzly Gulch Stage.....Walt Coburn 10
Not even as tough a U.S. deputy marshal as Wade Kane, men said, could hope to keep alive for thirty days in Grizzly Gulch, the town that was bossed by a quick-triggered tinhorn and a cold-nerved woman—for the benefit of the Road Agent Murder Syndicate!

Short Western Novel

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ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS!**

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IN THE SADDLE

TOM was a machinist's mate, second class, and was stationed at Pearl Harbor when the Japs came. He got a chance to run to a machine gun and fire a couple of bursts at one of their dive bombers before a piece of shrapnel took him in the leg. Sometime later, he landed at San Francisco, but that leg stayed back in Hawaii. We saw him after he'd gotten his honorable discharge, plus a new plastic limb.

"You can tell the guys who read your magazine," he said then, "that I'm not through fighting, and that all of us feel the same way. Hell, we haven't even started. It may take us a while to catch up with the start the Skibbies have on us, but believe us, those yellow rats will have even more reason to remember Pearl Harbor than we have!"

Last month we heard from him again: "They're having a little blow-out at the place where I work, and I think you'd be interested in visiting us. Pack up your lunch and come along."

We arrived at the place on the outskirts of the city. Tom met us at the gate and saw that we were passed by the Navy sentry. Atop the medium-sized building, the stars and stripes floated proudly.

"We're getting another flag this afternoon," Tom said, "to fly under that one." We joined the crowd of workers, of uniformed officers and dignitaries that entered the big room with an improvised platform at one end. In another part of the building could be heard the rumble of machinery.

"We don't shut down for this sort of thing," Tom grinned. "The boys—and the gals, too—at those machines can catch this from the loud speakers throughout the plant."

Tom left us and took his place upon the platform with other men. One of the officers of the company spoke, then came brief, pointed speeches by a representative of the Secretary of War, and another by a representative of the Secretary of the Navy, as they awarded to the men and women who worked there, and the factory itself, the Army and Navy E For Excellence.

"A little over a year ago," a company official said, "this factory was engaged in making powder compacts and metal cases for lipsticks. On Sunday night, December Seventh, 1941, we called a meeting of every employee we could find, and all the officers. We decided that the time had come to change our business, and do it fast. We found out that we could switch from making cases for lipsticks to turning out cases for .50 caliber cartridges. After getting the Government's OK, we went ahead. But we found that we were aiming too low.

"The Navy needed special parts for its scouting planes. Some of us said we couldn't convert our machines to make them. It was impossible,

(Continued on page 8)

How to Make YOUR Body Bring You FAME ... Instead of SHAME!

ARE YOU Skinny? Weak? Flabby?

Will You Let Me Prove I Can Make You a New Man?

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "the World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN OF YOU!

What Dynamic Tension Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—**my way.** I give you **no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension,"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

Charles Atlas

Holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." As he looks today, from actual untouched snapshot.

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In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today, AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 833, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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City ..... State .....

(Continued from page 6)

some of us believed, merely because it had never before been done with the kind of machines we had. Day and night we studied the problem, until at last we figured a way to make these parts. The Navy Department gave us a certain quota to meet, and again there were those who believed that amount of production was impossible to turn out.

"We appealed to everyone in the plant—from the night watchman on up—to help us. I am proud to say that, of their own volition, these men and women buckled down to the job and did it. Again our quota was stepped up, and again it was met. . . And we intend to keep on meeting it, regardless of cost in our own sweat and effort. We'll do it gladly and well, because we know that every time one of those punch presses completes an operation, we're helping to pay back in our own small way our brothers and friends who died gallantly fighting for all of us."

Then it was Tom's turn to talk, and we're repeating what he said, because we believe that what he said has direct bearing on the kind of Western stories you read in this magazine.

"Every time," Tom grinned, "I hear of a thing being checked off as being impossible, it makes me sore. Fighting mad. I'm thinking of what happened back there in Hawaii; thinking of the shipmates I had who were shot in the back without a chance; thinking of the proud battle-wagons which were served the same way. And I figure that I owe them a debt I can never repay. I ask myself, 'Who the hell are we to say anything's impossible? What the hell right have I got to give up a job, just because there doesn't seem any way to accomplish it?' The answer is, 'None whatever.'

"Come to think about it, the whole history of this country is a story of meeting, and beating, the 'impossible.' It was 'impossible' for a handful of green farmers, back in the days of the Revolution, to beat one of the best trained armies of Europe. But it was done. It was 'impossible,' too, for a few square-rigged ships, built of pine instead of oak, to meet and overcome in battle the greatest navy in the world at that time. But that, too, was done. And, to come down to a later day, folks used to laugh when they watched their neighbors in the East set out with their belongings loaded into a covered wagon, drawn by a pair of slow-moving oxen, to build a new and better life in the West.

"Such a trip, they figured, was impossible to make for any number of reasons. If you didn't die of thirst trying to cross the dry plains, you'd never be able to get over the mountains which had never been, so far as men knew, scaled by wagons. And, even then, you were almost sure to be killed by maurauding bands of murderous Indians.

"I suppose you'd call my folks pioneers, because they came to Oregon by covered wagon. Almost from the start, it seemed, as if that trip was doomed. Cholera hit the wagon train along the North Platte. There was no doctor; the people had never before had to deal with that black plague. Some got panicky and turned back, only to die at the hands of savages who took advantage of their weakness and attacked in overpowering numbers. Fresh graves were dug—graves left unmarked for fear the Indian scouts would figure out the toll of the disease. The wagons and belongings of those who were stricken were burned. Someone had heard that boiling the drinking water would lessen the chances of coming down with the sickness. It was said that the very air was poisoned, so those well enough to nurse the others attempted whatever crude precautions they could by soaking cloth in gunpowder and water and breathing through it, as a mask. At last, desperately weakened, the survivors kept on.

"More of the faint-hearted turned back when they reached the Snake River, where, in a dizzy chasm hundreds of feet below, that rushing cascade of water seemed an impossible barrier. But there were others who were determined, somehow, to get to the opposite side and continue to their destination.

"It took weeks of heartbreaking labor for those stalwart folk to take down the wagons cut down trees to reinforce them, then caulk the seams with pitch. Painstakingly, the wagon-boxes were lowered to the rocky canyon bed on crude windlasses. Then supplies and belongings were lowered and piled aboard.

More than a few were rewarded for that effort by seeing everything they possessed swept away and wrecked on the jagged granite rocks in the stream. Others, in attempting to steer their clumsy craft in that treacherous river, were drowned in full sight of their friends, who could only watch, in agonizing helplessness. But some —the strong, the cool-headed, the courageous— got through. And then the whole painstakingly slow and laborious process had to be repeated on the other side, to hoist the wagons up the sheer rock sides of the canyon once more. . . .

"It was a job for simple men, those with single-minded purpose, who had the kind of faith in God and in themselves never to be discouraged, and to carry through to the end.

"In a sense, we, too, are pioneering. We're having to meet and overcome new conditions, new disappointments, new obstacles which we have never before encountered. But we have the courage and the faith to do it. To fail would not only be to fail ourselves, the heritage of our own history, but also the men represented by the service flags you hang in your windows at home!"

We, too, are grateful that the fighting spirit which was held by those men and women who conquered the Western wilderness still forms a shining beacon, not only for the men in our Armed Forces, but also for those who supply the fighting tools for freedom!

—The Editors

Today I'M the foreman!

-last week I was only a bench worker

FOREMEN WANTED!
TO GET WAR WORK OUT
More Foremen than ever are needed to keep war production schedules at their peak.

FOREMEN WANTED!
TO TRAIN NEW WORKERS
Industry's labor problem is so great, Foremen are needed to train new men and women at their work benches.

FOREMEN WANTED!
FOR SUPERVISORY JOBS
War industries are in need of skilled and seasoned management. Foremen must be trained to fill good pay jobs at once.

You can qualify for a better job and BIGGER PAY

Right in your own factory—maybe in your own department, there's probably a job open for you . . . the job you've always wanted—the job of FOREMAN. Can you get it? Well, if you train yourself to know how to plan and schedule factory work—keep production at peak—handle labor problems—break in new workers—cut out waste—the need for competent Foremen exists everywhere today. And LaSalle has the proven way to train yourself at home in your spare moments to become a Foreman.

Important to Your Country—VITAL TO YOU

Ultimate Victory requires continuous, superior production of everything American fighting men need. If you're a qualified Foreman, you can help assure this. And after Victory—your ability and training will qualify you for the better jobs in industry. Can you do it? We'll show you proof that it has been done by many men. And what others have done you should be able to do.

THESE MEN SUCCEEDED
And So Can You!

"In the last 18 months, I have been worker, group leader, assistant foreman and at present am foreman. My salary has been more than doubled." O. C., Ky.

"During the five months I was studying your training, my salary more than doubled." O. S., Ohio

"When I enrolled, I was making approximately $40 a week. For the past three months, I have made $85 a week, so am entitled to your 100% Club button." C. N., Ind.

"Since enrolling, I have been appointed night foreman over nine inspectors and 12 machine operators." R. A., Ill.

"Since I enrolled, my salary has been raised 63 percent and I have been given new responsibilities." L. G., Montreal

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Send me FREE, without cost or obligation, your 48-page book which shows me how I can train at home to qualify as Foreman in my work.

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City ..... *State* .....

HELL RIDES THE GRIZZLY GULCH STAGE

Smashing Novel of Montana's Gold Frontier

By WALT COBURN

The six-horse team hit a run. . . .

No living man, said old-timers along Montana's roaring gold frontier, had either strong enough nerve or swift enough guns to tame the lawless town of Grizzly Gulch, which was bossed equally by Devil Dan Kane, straight-shooting tinhorn, Black Diamond, cold-blooded woman gambler, and the Road Agent Rocks murder syndicate. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble at Road Agent Rocks

THE stagecoach that brought the mail, express and passengers from the railroad town of Junction to Grizzly Gulch was late.

It was raining at Grizzly Gulch and it was reasonable enough to figure that the rain had spread across a good part of

that seventy-five miles of Montana rolling prairie and gumbo flats. Citizens of that cow-town and mining camp who habitually timed the arrival of the stage allowed for the loss of time on account of the muddy roads. You couldn't exactly set your watch by the arrival of the stage, but Buckskin Frank was the best driver that ever threw the leather at a six-horse team, and Biddy Malone would gamble on it enough to shove a pan of sourdough biscuits into the oven to have them done when Buckskin Frank turned his team over to the stock tender and swaggered in for his ten o'clock supper.

Now Biddy Malone had spoiled a batch of biscuits, and her Irish was up.

" 'Tis not the hub-deep gumbo across the alkali flats," she told Black Diamond, the only woman gambler in that part of the country, "nor is it the greasy pull up Slippery Grade that's thrown' Buckskin Frank late this night."

Black Diamond smiled faintly. She was a handsome, Junoesque woman with blue-black hair and slate-gray eyes. She owned both the Casino and the Diamond ranch between Grizzly Gulch and Junction. She sipped her strong black coffee and waited for the rest of it.

" 'Tis them road agents again, ma'am," Biddy Malone finished decisively, pushing back a lock of her reddish-gray hair.

The two women were sitting at Biddy's private little table in the eating house kitchen where Black Diamond was always a priviledged guest. The front door opened, letting in a gust of rain soaked wind, followed by a tall, black mustached man in a long black saddle slicker.

"Speak av the Divil!" Biddy's hoarse voice dropped.

The newcomer took off his Stetson and dripping slicker. He was the only man at Grizzly Gulch who wore clean white shirts and a black tie and tailored black clothes. His high-heeled black boots were always polished and free of the yellow mud

His eyes were deepset and black, and the drooping black mustache hid the corners of a straight, thin-lipped mouth.

His name was Dan Kane. He owned three saloons at Grizzly Gulch and controlled and banked every gambling game except the games that Black Diamond ran at her Casino. Biddy Malone was not the only person in the Grizzly Mountains who hinted that Dan Kane backed other, less lawful games for high stakes.

"So you've been speaking of the Devil in his absence, Biddy." His white teeth flashed a quick smile that never reached his black eyes. Then he bowed with an odd mixture of respect, mockery and admiration to Black Diamond. She smiled faintly and nodded, her eyes as cold and as hard to read as his.

Biddy Malone had some scathing remark ready to bring at the gambler when the door swung open again and Cuff Brophy, the big, broad-shouldered spur jingling town marshal, stepped inside.

Brophy's low pulled hat was dark and dripping with rain. There was a rip down the back of his yellow saddle slicker. His chaps and boots and spurs were muddy. His square-jawed face looked drawn and grayish and where the water dripped from the left sleeve of his slicker it was stained pinkish. His steely blue-gray eyes cut a sharp look at Duke Kane. Then he saw the two women in the kitchen, watching him, and a lopsided grin pulled across his mouth.

"You kin shove your biscuits in the oven, Biddy. Buckskin Frank will be along directly. . . . Black Diamond, you and Dan Kane kin fix for a big night. The mine payroll is comin' in a couple hours late, mebby, but it'll be here." Then he turned to Dan Kane.

"The road agents stopped the stage at the top of Slipp'ry Grade. They run into some tough luck. There was a new express guard ridin' up on top with Buckskin Frank. He didn't shoot to miss."

"And where," asked Biddy Malone, her red fists on her wide hips, "was you wile the shootin' was goin' on, Cuff Brophy?"

"I got there in time to side the express guard," said the big law officer grimly. "And if you've got something besides that mulligan stew for supper, get ready to put it out. And a clean tablecloth and a napkin. There's a lady aboard the stagecoach—the new schoolmarm. Game little thing. Seventy-five miles of listenin' to the lies of that whisky-soaked stage driver was bad enough for a pilgrim lady. Then to have the trip topped

off with a hold-up and gun-fightin'! But that purty little Miss Toby Diamond taken it like she was plumb—You sick or somethin', lady?"

BLACK DIAMOND was on her feet, her handsome face chalk white. Something like terror widened and darkened her slate gray eyes. While the gambler and town marshal stared hard at her. Biddy Malone put her arm protectingly about the other woman's shoulders.

"Ye scuts!" Biddy's voice was harsh, "Ye low-lived, connivin' scuts! 'Tis the kind av a weapon ye'd be usin', ye Devil Dan Kane, ferninst a daycint lady like Lou Diamond! Cuff Brophy, I'll wipe the grin off yer face with a hot skillet. Shame on the pair av ye, ye scum!"

Black Diamond recovered her poise, but her slate gray eyes were dangerous. "I'll take the deal, Biddy." Her voice was husky, deep throated. "Talk fast, Dan. Who sent for Toby Diamond to take this schoolteacher job. I don't know how you ever found out I had a daughter or where I had her living, safe from here. . . . I've never killed a man, but I'll kill you like I'd kill a mad dog if you don't have the right answer! You made one of your left-handed gestures, when you built that little log schoolhouse. You and Cuff Brophy run this town. . . . I said talk fast, Dan!"

"Until now, Lou," came the gambler's flat voice, "I didn't know you had a daughter. I wouldn't lie to you. I doubt if Cuff Brophy knows any more than I do about her. I sent to Helena for a schoolteacher. You can believe me, or you can start shooting."

Black Diamond stood there, tall, almost regal, her ringless white hands clenched, a stricken look in her eyes.

"Get out of that green dress you're wearing," said Dan Kane, "and put on your ranch clothes. Be at the stage office when Buckskin Frank pulls in. Cuff and I will take care of things. She'll never know from us that you own the Casino. We'll pass the word along the street. I'll take care of anybody that talks out of turn. I'll run your Casino for you if you'll trust me. Or buy it from you, cash on the line. But now you'd better meet the stage. You and Biddy can take care of Toby Diamond. . . . Come on, Cuff. You need a doctor, by the looks of that blood coming out of your sleeve."

Biddy got a bottle of Irish whiskey from a cupboard and poured out two stiff drinks and watered them.

"That Divil Dan Kane spoke like he wasn't lyin'. Drink hearty, darlin'. 'Twill come out all clean in the wash, and if Toby is any part av the foine lady her mither is, she'll love ye the more fer everything!"

BEFORE daybreak that morning, Buckskin Frank had picked up one passenger who had come in on the early morning train at Junction. She was a tall, slender girl with slate-gray eyes, a mop of curly black hair, and a smile that had warmed the stage driver's heart like a big slug of whiskey.

She said her name was Toby Diamond and that she was going to Grizzly Gulch to teach school. Earning her own living, she confided in him as he loaded her baggage on the boot, for the first time in her life. And she had accepted eagerly his awkward invitation to ride up with him on the driver's seat.

"Before we pull into Grizzly Gulch," Buckskin Frank had promised recklessly, "you'll know how to handle the ribbons on a six-horse stagecoach team, ma'am."

At the Junction depot where Buckskin Frank drove around with a flourish and a cracking of the wide buckskin popper of his sixteen-foot, hand-braided whip, there had been a short but tense little drama that had drained the color from Toby Diamond's tanned cheeks and had Buckskin Frank cussing softly into his handlebar mustache.

The door of the express office was open. The regular shotgun guard, a big-framed gun-slinger known as Timberline, was standing inside, a cartridge belt and six-shooter buckled around his flanks, a sawed-off shotgun and carbine leaning against the office wall. The railway express agent was getting the express

strongbox out of the huge, old, iron safe.

In the dim starlight the man who crossed the street from the hotel's all-night restaurant was only a tall, quick moving shadow. Until he vaulted up on the station platform and went into the lighted express office.

Then he showed plainly enough. A tall, tow-headed man of about thirty, he was dressed in the boots and hat, flannel shirt and levi overalls of a cowhand. And pinned to the left pocket of his clean blue flannel shirt was a law badge.

Timberline's hand had dropped to the butt of his gun. But before he could pull it, the tall, tow-headed cowpuncher's gun was out. He took a couple of swift strides, and his six-shooter barrel smashed against the side of Timberline's jaw. It chopped down again with a dull, sickening thud on the shotgun guard's head. Timberline's legs buckled and he went down to the floor.

There was a faint grin on the tow-headed cowhand's face as he shoved his six-shooter back into his open holster. He took a legal looking paper from his pocket and shoved it at the gaping express agent.

"Here's my credentials. I'm ridin' guard on the express box and mail sacks. I'm United States Deputy Marshal Wade Kane. . . . When this Timberline gent comes alive, tell him it might be a good idea for him to quit the country—that next time I'm playin' for keeps."

Buckskin was still cussing softly and Toby Diamond had not quite gotten back her composure when the tall tow-headed deputy marshal tossed the heavy steel strongbox and mail sacks up to the stage driver.

"Seein' you've got a passenger," he told Buckskin Frank, "I'll ride inside. I hear your name is Buckskin Frank and you kin throw away those six lines and herd 'em along with your whip. . . . Sorry you had to see that Wild West show, lady, but I had to talk the only language that Timberline renegade savvies. Pour it to 'em, Buckskin. Let's git yonderly." Marshal Wade Kane crawled inside the stagecoach with the sawed-off shotgun and .30-30 carbine.

"Kane," rumbled Buckskin Frank. "Wade Kane. You ary kin to the gambler they call Dan Kane at Grizzly Gulch?"

"Nephew," grinned Wade Kane. "Ain't seen him since I was a yearlin.' I hear he does right well for himself."

"Yeah. . . . This is goin' to be a kinda su'prise fer Devil Dan."

Buckskin Frank kicked off his brake. His long lash that never touched the hide of a horse save to flick off a horsefly, popped like a gun. The stagecoach lurched and rocked like a canoe on a rough sea as the six-horse team hit their collars and left Junction at a run, taking a bend in the road on two wheels.

The girl on the driver's seat clung with both hands to the rail and tried to keep from yelling. And the tall shotgun guard inside grinned to himself as he spilled tobacco into a brown cigarette paper.

Wade Kane had seen the girl on the train coming down from Helena. Now she was going to Grizzly Gulch, and there was no way to stop her from going without her asking a lot of woman questions that he had no right to answer.

He'd had to make a tough play of it back at the depot. There was the big chance that Timberline would get a saddle horse and cut around ahead. But if he knew Timberline, that big hombre would quit the country fast, because he knew that the law officer had recognized him for a renegade with a price on his head, who worked in with the road agent gang. But the girl troubled him. If there was a hold-up, and guns started swapping hot lead, that stagecoach was going to be no place for a girl—the prettiest girl, Wade Kane told himself, he'd seen in many a moon.

ABOVE the rattle of the wheels and creak of thick leather springs Wade Kane could hear the tipsy voice of Buckskin Frank starting to spin wild tales of stage-driving feats, hold-ups and narrow escapes to the girl up on top. Now and then Wade could hear her infectious, wholesome laugh.

He wished she was riding inside the coach with him. He wondered who she was and what was taking her to the tough mining camp and cow-town.

He'd heard her say her name was Toby

Diamond, and he had never met any girl named Toby. He liked the name. It suited her curly black hair, her short nose and red lips and the smile that crinkled her eyes to laughing, bright slits. Yeah, Toby Diamond. . . .

The slow, cold rain started before they reached the first stage station. Toby put on one of the extra yellow saddle slickers that Buckskin Frank carried along for passengers who had none. But the slicker was sizes too big and the rain trickled into the neckband and down her back, and she had no taste for the forty-rod whiskey that Buckskin Frank offered her every time he took a pull at his gallon jug. She was pinched and shivering with cold when she finally decided she'd ride inside the coach.

Wade Kane fastened the heavy canvas curtains down backward, the girl opposite him. Wade felt red-eared and awkward around women. And all the bright remarks he had been storing up to spring on her when she came inside were gone from his memory. Her level gaze and forced smile made him feel awkward.

"If it'll make you feel better, ma'am," he broke the long, awkward silence, "I'll ride up on top with Buckskin Frank where I belong, with the artillery." He grinned at the sawed-off shotgun and saddle carbine on the seat beside him.

"No, don't let me put you out in the rain. . . . It's just that I've never been so close to. . . . I mean, riding along like this, with a professional killer."

"A—*which?*"

"That's what Buckskin Frank said you liked to be called. That you had killed a lot of men. That the United States government paid you five hundred dollars cash for every outlaw you killed, and if you kept on you could retire wealthy in another five years. Buckskin said you killed that Timberline man by caving in his skull because you were polite and didn't like to have me listen to the shooting. Buckskin says that you—"

Wade Kane's face reddened, then he wanted to break that whiskey talking stage driver's unwashed neck. Yet it was comical and he grinned widely, shaking his head.

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"I hate to tear down the rep that Buckskin Frank's built up for me. My job sometimes calls for gun-work, but I'm not a bounty-hunter. We try to prevent killin' when we can, and turn 'em over to the law courts. . . . It would help a lot if you'd quit starin' at me like I was some kind of a dangerous animal in a zoo cage."

It was Toby Diamond's turn to get red and embarrassed. Then she laughed and that broke the tension. They got along all right.

The steady drizzle kept up, and the going got heavy. They had a hot meal at the stage station where Buckskin Frank got fresh horses. Wade and the driver piled robes and blankets inside and the girl slept most of the afternoon. Wade rode up with Buckskin Frank in the whipping rain.

"How come," asked Buckskin Frank, "you treated young Timberline thataway, mister?"

"If you don't know or can't make your own guess," said Wade Kane, "then you'll have to stay ignorant. . . . There's about twenty thousand dollars in this li'l' ol' tin box."

He slapped the heavy steel express strongbox.

Buckskin Frank grunted and took a pull at his jug. He looked hurt when Wade refused a drink. "Timberline," he told Wade Kane, "would kill a quart every trip. Me'n him would go havers on a jug."

Wade cut the stage driver a sharp look. "Was that all you went havers on, Buckskin?"

Buckskin Frank got it, all right. His voice was a roar of righteous indignation: "I draw top wages to drive stage. I don't own a gun. The shotgun guard gits paid to protect the strongbox and mail sacks. If Timberline laid down his gun when them road agents got the drop on him, that was his business and I taken no part in it. Don't be slingin' no mud at me, young feller! I drive stage."

The irate Buckskin Frank lapsed into an indignant silence that lasted all of a mile or more before his whiskey-loosened tongue began wagging again. And Wade Kane rode in the rain and listened to the tall windies about hold-ups and wild rides behind six-horse teams over precipitous mountain roads.

Buckskin made it plain that this was not his best whip, because in rainy weather he used this second best, six-horse lash. His best whipstock and buckskin braided lash was put away in a waterproof sheath.

It was the most precious thing he owned, the badge of his proud calling, and he guarded it jealously. Even as he prided himself on the way he handled his team. There was not a collar-galled horse in any of his relays. And, carrying on the traditions of the stage driver brotherhood, he further claimed all due credit for his yarn-spinning ability and his capacity for holding forty-rod whiskey. He could pick a horsefly off the rump of one of his leaders without disturbing a single hair on that brushed and curried coat. And it was his great boast that he could throw away his six lines and drive his team with his whip.

"I'm willin'," said Wade Kane, dryly, "to take your word for it, Buckskin."

No, Buckskin Frank was not in cahoots with any road agent gang. . . .

IT WAS drizzling rain and getting dark when they stopped for a last change of horses at the Diamond ranch. There Buckskin Frank let his lone passenger off in front of the log cabin he called the cook shack.

"The grub-spoiler will fix you up with coffee and a bait of hot grub, ma'am. He's a Chink and a good 'un. He's bin with Black Diamond fer years."

"Black Diamond?"

"Yes, ma'am, the one and only Black Diamond. She owns this cow-outfit and the Casino at Grizzly Gulch as well. And she's as handy with a rope or brandin' iron as she is with a deck of cards. Though she's got a big spur jinglin', handsome ramrod named Jack Santell runnin' the outfit. And the best dealers outside herself and Devil Dan Kane to handle her games at the Casino. . . . Now don't stand in the rain, lady. Trot inside. The Chink will take the wrinkles outa your belly—Excuse me, ma'am. The brake slipped on my tongue. In you git, now,

outa the dampness. You look kinda peaked. I've knowed 'em to get plumb seasick, ridin' inside this stagecoach."

Toby Diamond's smile was a little forced. She gathered the dragging yellow slicker around her and went into the lamplit cook cabin.

Buckskin Frank was staying with his stagecoach to oversee the changing of his team, while Wade Kane guarded his strong-box and mail sacks. The Chink would give them hot beef sandwiches and a jug of strong black coffee to take along.

Buckskin Frank worried about his good looking young lady passenger. "She looked shore peaked, Wade."

Wade Kane nodded. The trip had been long and tedious and a swaying, rocking stagecoach sloshing through the mud can make a delicate stomach squeamish. But somehow Wade had a notion that the girl was not suffering from any sort of stagecoach illness. Wade had a hunch that it had been Buckskin Frank's talk about Black Diamond that had drained the color from the girl's face. And her name was Toby Diamond. . . .

But when they picked her up at the cook cabin she was smiling and the healthy color was back in her cheeks. The Chink was grinning and jabbering pidgin English when he followed her out with the stack of meat sandwiches and a big jug of black coffee.

"Goo'-bye, Missy Toby," he grinned. "Goo' luck. One time lilly gal, glow up now, big lady. You betcha. Goo'-bye So-long Missy Toby."

"Black Diamond," the girl answered the questions in the eyes of the two men, "is my mother."

She got inside, and Wade Kane buckled the curtains.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Outlaws Don't Talk

THE stage road left the rolling prairie and twisted into the pine covered foothills. The drizzle-filled night was as black as a bat cave. The lead team picked out the road and the swing team and wheelers never slacked a tug. Now and then the long buckskin lash would flick out and the wet popper would make a flat, dull crack.

The sandwiches were eaten and the strong black coffee warmed Wade Kane. He sheltered his lighted cigarette in his cupped hand. He told Buckskin Frank to let him know when they reached the foot of Slippery Grade.

The stage driver said he wouldn't need any telling, even in the pitch black darkness, because the grade was steep and as slippery in places as if it was covered with axle grease. Buckskin said that it took a sure-footed team and a damned good driver to keep the outfit from dropping a few hundred feet down onto the rocks in the canyon. And it was a good thing that little lady inside the stagecoach didn't know about the danger.

"Mebbyso," said Wade, "she didn't know before. But she'd have to be deaf as a post not to be plumb aware of it now. That whisper of yours has a fog horn ashamed of itself."

Wade thought he heard Toby Diamond laugh, but he couldn't be sure.

They pulled the long Slippery Grade without mishap, halting now and then to let the horses blow. When they reached one leveled-off place the team halted of their own accord, and Buckskin Frank kicked on his brake and held it there with his braced leg. Then, when the six horses got their wind, the tugs tightened, the brake eased off and they continued the perilous climb.

"Next stop will be on top of the ridge, level ground," said Buckskin Frank. "And five miles to Grizzly Gulch. Boulders bigger'n a house. Called Road Agent Rocks."

Wade Kane leaned over the side of the coach. His voice was calm. "Kin you hear me, lady?"

"Of course. Next stop is Road Agent Rocks. They earn their name. Here's what I want you to do: Lay flat on the floor and pull those laprobes over you. Don't move. Don't holler out. Just lay low. Because there's li'ble to be some shootin'.

"Now, don't be scared. They won't be shootin' at you. And before you git time to commence countin' the shots fired, Buckskin Frank will be pourin' the buckskin to his ponies. Got it straight, Miss Toby?"

"I'll lay low," Toby Diamond's voice was steady enough, "And I won't screech once."

"All right, Buckskin," said Wade Kane, "Let's git along."

"You want me to run the g'ntlet, Wade?"

"If your team ain't too winded."

"They won't be too winded. They're smellin' grain an' hay right now. This is a short haul, this last laig up Slipp'ry Grade. You aim to make a fight?"

"Unless they kill me, they get a Mexican stand-off on his strongbox, Buckskin. So if they come out from behind the rocks, you drop down in the boot outa sight and do your drivin' from a safe place. I'll stay up here on the seat."

There was the sound of a cork pulled from the neck of the whiskey jug. A long gurgle, then a snort of contempt.

"I never crawled down into the boot yet, son. . . . Yonder's their fire!"

At the top of the grade two big kerosine-soaked bonfires, one on each side of the road, threw a sudden yellow glow into the rain filled darkness.

As the stage neared the twin fires four men in slickers, black handkerchiefs pulled up across their faces, rode out from behind the rocks. They had six-shooters in their hands.

As the lead team neared the rocks, two of the road agents rode towards the road to bar their way. While the other two men rode towards the stagecoach.

"Pull up and wind your team, Buckskin!" barked one of them. "You, Timberline, toss down that strongbox. You kin keep the damn' mail!"

"Pour the whip to 'em," gritted Wade Kane. He had crawled back along the flat top of the stagecoach that held tarp-covered express stuff, lashed to the guard rail that ran all around the top.

Buckskin Frank's long whiplash cracked twice and his big voice roared: "Lady passenger inside. Shoot high, boys!"

The lead team nearly knocked the two road agents down. The six horse team hit the collars with a jerk that pulled the stagecoach with a lurching, swaying jerk. Those six horses were loping now.

"You drunken damned son!" shouted one of the road agents.

Wade Kane crouched on top of the stagecoach, bracing himself against the lurching, pitching sway. Bullets whined around his head as four six-shooters opened fire.

Then United States Deputy Marshal Wade Kane began shooting. Squeezing the trigger, levering the smoking empty brass shell out of the breech and throwing a fresh cartridge into its place and shooting again.

The stock of his carbine never got to his shoulder. He held the gun waist high, shooting without lining his sights. Shooting fast, hitting his human targets.

One road agent dropped his gun and went down, holding onto his belly with both hands. A second man reeled drunkenly, his gun dropping when the .30-30 slug smashed his right shoulder.

As the six-horse team hit a run, dragging the stagecoach around a bend, the big Concord coach swaying on two-wheels and almost turning over, Wade Kane got a snap shot at a third man and saw him reel like he'd been badly hit. And just as the coach rounded the bend and the big boulders, Wade Kane saw another man on horseback.

That rider's gun was spewing jets of fire. The fourth road-agent whirled around, shooting, then pitched down on his hands and knees in the mud. . . .

They went a mile before Buckskin Frank halted his blowing horses to let them get their wind.

Wade had crawled back to the driver's seat alongside Buckskin Frank who, by some sort of miracle, had not been hit. Wade leaned over the side to call to the girl.

Her head with its mop of curly black hair was outside the canvas curtains. Her face was pale, rain washed, her hair wet.

"I've got a hunch," he called down to her, "that you kinda forgot to lay low and cover up, lady."

"You didn't hear me holler," she called back. "I obeyed you that much. Are either of you hurt?"

"Buckskin's feelin's are all shot apart. By the sound he's makin' and the smell of spilled likker, I think a stray bullet smashed his little brown jug."

"And it's five miles," complained Buckskin Frank, "to town and the next drinkin' likker. But I'll have a yarn—"

"Shut up!" snapped Wade Kane. "Duck your head, Toby! We got company comin'. Whip up, Buckskin."

"These horses couldn't give us another hundred yards, son. Not till they ketch their wind."

But it was one lone rider and he hailed the stagecoach before Wade Kane fired a shot.

"Hold your fire, mister! I'm Cuff Brophy, marshal at Grizzly Gulch. "I backed the last part of your play, whoever you are that's taken Timberline's job."

"You was the gent on horseback," said Wade Kane. "I didn't see your badge."

"You don't think I wear it pinned outside my slicker! Who are you, mister? You're damned quick-triggered!"

"Easy on the cussin', Cuff," barked Buckskin Frank. "Lady inside—Miss Toby Diamond. As game a little lady as every I seen in my misspent life. Think she'd lay low like Wade Kane told her? Not by a damsight! Hell, no! Had that purty curly black head of hern stuck out through the curtains and watched the whole show. Miss Toby's the new schoolmarm at Grizzly Gulch. Now lope on ahead, Cuff, and tell Biddy to fry a mess of prairie chicken an' dust off a pie, for the game little daughter of Black Diamond!"

Darkness hid the startled expression on Cuff Brophy's face.

"Wade Kane," he muttered, "Toby Diamond. . . ." He spurred his big gelding to a long lope and headed for Grizzly Gulch.

"I wish you hadn't told him about me, Buckskin," said Toby Diamond. "I wanted to surprise my mother. But I guess it don't matter."

"Like I aimed to surprise Duke Kane," said Wade. "But sometimes it don't work out so good, surprisin' people."

Toby Diamond said something about those dead men back there in the rain. Buckskin said a wagon would be sent to Road Agent Rocks. Then he popped his whip and headed for town and his next drink.

IT SEEMED like the entire population was gathered there at the stage office when Buckskin Frank drove up, his long whiplash cracking, braking to a precision halt that left no more than an inch between the off wheels of the stagecoach and the high, wide plank walk.

Black Diamond had changed to a shabby leather riding skirt and high heeled boots and a flannel shirt and leather jacket. A cream colored Stetson crowned her head. Her face was a little flushed and her slate gray eyes were bright as she unbuckled the canvas curtains and Toby came out of the coach and into her mother's embrace.

Dan Kane and Cuff Brophy, the latter with his left arm in a sling, stood in the lamplit stage office. Together they owned the stage line and the mail and express contracts.

While Buckskin Frank was roaring greetings to the crowd, United States Deputy Marshal Wade Kane tossed down the mail sacks and lugged the heavy steel strongbox down from the coach and carried it across the wide plank walk, through a crowd of silent and gaping citizens, into the lamplit office. There he set it down on the floor and stood beside it, a dripping, slicker-clad figure. He pulled off his hat and slapped the rain from it and pulled it back on his head.

All this time his eyes had never left the hard stare of the gambler Dan Kane.

Only a writer like Walt Coburn, who knows real cow-folks first-hand can portray them with such rich, vivid color and human warmth as he does in this novel of Grizzly Gap. Yet, next month, Walt turns to another kind of character, in a starkly realistic novel of Montana, called "Killer Without a Name!" For sheer, thrilling cow-country drama, don't miss it! Buy the big April DIME WESTERN February 26th!

Wade Kane's slicker had leaked a lot, and his flannel shirt and levi overalls were wetly stained. Wade rubbed the heel of his left hand across the law badge pinned to his shirt pocket.

"Uncle Sam," he broke the silence, as Cuff Brophy shut the stage office door on the gaping crowd outside, "didn't like the way that Timberline shotgun guard was letting the U. S. mail git mishandled. He put me on the job. Here's the strongbox with the mine payroll. And the first and second class and registered mail sacks. Who signs for 'em?"

"I do," said Cuff Brophy. "But not till I count the money in that strongbox and have a look at the registered mail sack."

"Then git at it," said Wade Kane, "I've had a long day. And send a wagon for thoses dead and wounded road agents. I want to look 'em over."

"Dead road agents," said Cuff Brophy. "No wounded."

"You did a neat job then, Brophy, of moppin' up. You wiped out at least one man I just winged because I wanted anyhow one out of that road agent gang who would talk."

"Too bad, ain't it?" grinned Cuff Brophy.

"For me, yeah. I'd have had better luck, only we had a lady passenger." Then Wade Kane stared again into the opaque black eyes of the gambler Dan Kane.

"Long time no see you, Dan. But I've heard reports from time to time."

"Long ears," observed Dan Kane, "hear a lot. You didn't get this shotgun-guard job by accident, Wade."

"No. I asked for it. My memory is as long as my ears."

"Don't crowd your luck."

Wade Kane grinned faintly. "That goes double, Dan. Yours and Cuff Brophy's won't stand strainin' too far. . . . Get that stuff tallied and signed for, Mister Town Marshal of Grizzly Gulch. You're keepin' me from my supper."

"With the little lady?" Cuff Brophy grinned crookedly.

Wade Kane's fists clenched and he took a step forward. Big Cuff Brophy spat on the floor and shook his head.

"When I've got two good arms, I'll take you apart in hunks, mister. Keep yourself on ice till then."

The office door opened and the mine superintendent, his paymaster, and two hard looking men with six-shooters and sawed-off shotguns came in for the mine payroll.

The Grizzly Mining Company was a privately owned concern. The mine superintendant was a small, wiry, waspish tempered man in his fifties. His sharp blue eyes looked at Wade Kane. He smiled and held out his hand.

"I'm Liggett, the Grizzly Mine boss. Thanks for everything. When you get time tomorrow drop in at the office. Now I've got to get those muck stick swingers paid off so they can lose it to Dan Kane and Black Diamond. . . . Count it over to the paymaster, Cuff. Those single-jack artists are clamoring for their damn' money."

It was half an hour before Wade Kane got out of the office. Dan Kane had already left to make the rounds of his saloons and gambling tables.

Wade crossed the muddy street to Biddy Malone's restaurant.

Buckskin Frank's big voice boomed in the kitchen, where he was giving Biddy a colorful version of the hold-up.

At a corner table sat Black Diamond and Toby. The animation of their first warm greeting was gone. Mother and daughter were both a little pale. Neither of them were smiling. They looked like they had been having some bitter kind of a quarrel. But as Wade Kane came in, they quit talking. Black Diamond got to her feet, holding out her hand. Her smile was warm and cordial.

"I'm . . . Black Diamond. Toby has told me your name, and I can't help but get an earful from Buckskin Frank's glowing account. Thanks, Wade Kane, for more than you know about. Please sit down. You can act as a sort of referee. This youngster thinks she's going to be the new schoolmarm at Grizzly Gulch. I tell her she's going back to Helena. And right there we locked horns."

"Why not split the difference," grinned Wade Kane, "and settle for the Diamond Ranch for her?"

Black Diamond nodded. "Call that a deal, Toby, pardner. The ranch, honey?"

Toby Diamond smiled slowly into her mother's troubled eyes. "I'll forget the schoolmarm job," she said, "and stay at the ranch."

They were shaking hands on it when the door opened and the Diamond Ranch ramrod, Jack Santell, swaggered in.

JACK SANTELL was a six footer and well built, with a pair of wide shoulders and lean flanks. His weight and measurements would have probably tallied about the same as those of Wade Kane. But there the resemblance ended.

The Diamond ramrod was too handsome to be true. He had the effect on other men of wanting to make them smash the perfection of his too perfectly chiseled features. His reddish brown hair was thick and wavy, almost curly, and his mustache was painstakingly trimmed, the ends curled and twisted to waxed points. His smile was arrogant, mocking.

His eyes were a yellowish green color like a cougar's, and in varying lights their color seemed to change, like those of a cougar's, from yellow to green or green to yellow. There was no mercy in those eyes and when you looked into them you believed the stories you heard about his deadliness with a gun or knife.

Wade Kane stood on widespread legs, sizing up the man who closed the door behind him, his hand on the ivory handle of his six-shooter.

Santell had discarded his slicker and chaps and he wore an Indian tanned buckskin shirt that had been made to his measurements and without fringe or beads or stained porcupine quills. Around his throat he wore a dark red silk neck handkerchief. His checked wool California pants were foxed with a white buckskin seat and the legs were shoved into the fancy stitched tops of tan alligator boots. His Mexican spurs were heavy and crusted with silver and their large rowels tinkled like bells. His buckskin colored Stetson was the ten gallon size and slanted at an arrogant angle on his too handsome head. Jack Santell looked like he belonged to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He might have, at that, because he could do fancy roping as well as trick riding.

Wade Kane and Jack Santell sized one another up and at the end of that long minute of cold scrutiny the two men were enemies. It was one of those quick and lasting hatreds that sometimes occur between men meeting for the first time.

The Santell's yellowish green eyes looked past Wade Kane and at the two women. His hat came off with an easy gesture that the law officer could never have copied. He walked past Wade, ignoring him, over to the table, putting himself between the deputy marshal and the two women.

"This is my daughter Toby," said Black Diamond. "Toby, this is Jack Santell. He runs the Diamond outfit. Santell fancies himself as a lady killer. It's like him to walk in here without even mud on his boots, and dressed like he was leading Buffalo Bill's parade. But for all that, he's a top cowhand."

Black Diamond's voice was sharp-edged as a whetted blade. Her next question was needle pointed. "What brings you away from the round-up, Santell?"

"A little business you and I had better auger about in private, boss."

He took the chair Wade Kane had been about to use. Wade was suddenly aware of the fact that his clothes were mud-spattered and damp, and that he needed a shave and a bath and clean clothes. He saw Toby Diamond smiling at Santell, her eyes bright. And that range dude was leaning across the table, about to pay her some fancy compliment.

It was Buckskin Frank who literally pulled him out of an awkward spot. The stage driver came in from the kitchen. The fact that his mouth was filled with hot biscuit did not damper his genial roar, or impair his powers of oratory.

"Wade, come out here into the kitchen and join me in a snort of Biddy's private stock. And see how thick you want this T-bone cut."

Wade Kane grinned flatly and headed for the kitchen, Buckskin Frank's big hand on his shoulder, guiding and shoving him through the doorway. Almost into the arms of the red-cheeked Biddy. And when the lanky rawboned stage driver followed Wade into the kitchen he kicked the door shut with a bang.

"Biddy, shake hands with the lead-slingin'est shotgun guard that ever rode alongside me. Pour him a big shot of that Irish fightin' likker. . . . And when they commenced a-shootin' at him, Biddy, I opened up them six horses and every time that Betsy whip popped it gouged out a little hunk of road agent hide. Spoiled their aim complete. And may the howlin' wolves never cease! Drink hearty, Wade Kane!"

Perhaps that long buckskin lash had done just that. Wade was more than willing to concede that to his whiskey-loving stage driver who had just pulled him out of a bog hole. He felt almighty grateful right now to Buckskin Frank and Biddy Malone who was beaming at him, her Irish blue eyes a little misty.

The drink she shoved into his hand was a big one. She had poured herself one and handed the bottle of Irish whiskey to Buckskin Frank.

Wade Kane's awkwardness slipped away. Biddy winked and jerked a thumb towards the closed door to the dining room. "Mister Fancy Pants!" she said. "Bad cess to his gizzard. Drink hearty."

There was a huge iron skillet filled with frying prairie chicken, and two big thick T-bone steaks. Wade said that if it was all right with Biddy he'd eat here in the kitchen with Buckskin Frank.

"Toby Diamond," he said, "don't like killers. And I smell like the barn."

"Ye're no fancy lady-killer," said Biddy, "but the pay-off don't take place till the race is run, and me money's on you, Wade, bye. Now don't you be gettin' as red as a turkey gobbler's beard. More than one girl has had her head turned around till her neck ached by the likes av such fancy ladies' men, and ain't I the wan to know it! Mike Malone was wan av 'em, either behind his bar or on the spendin' side. Wit' his red neckties and diamond horseshoe stickpins and fancy vests and girl's red garters fer sleeve bands and forever peakin' into the back bar lookin' glass to curl his mustache. Wit' an eye for iv'ry neat turned ankle that passed his corner saloon.

"'Twas that rovin' eye av his that brought on his quick end, though there was divil a bit av harm in Mike Malone. And the smoke av the scut's gun that killed him over a faithless wife had scarce evaporated till some av Mike's pals av the Ancient Order av Hibernians dragged the murderin' scut out and strung him up to a telegraph pole. And the wake the byes give Mike Malone! The great John L. Sullivan himself there. And the fancy wimmin that come to wail. 'Twas not till then that this coleen wit' the green sod av County Cork still on her shoes, got her silly eyes open. . . .

"Now take Buckskin. Wit' the smell av the horse sweat and barn foriver fightin' wit' the booze, and him knowin' the names and habits av every horse he drives on the stage line, and the big talk av him and never rememberin' me birthday wit' a present. Stealin' the last drop in a woman's bottle and all. But he's all man and a heart as big as a bucket, mind ye, under his ribs.

"Sure, Buckskin's no fancy man, but I wouldn't trade him for a corral full av Jack Santells. And divil a bit does Biddy Malone care if me words is burnin' the ears av them that's listenin' beyond the door. . . . Pass the bottle to Wade Kane, Buckskin."

Biddy Malone carried a big platter of fried prairie chicken into the restaurant then followed it with other dishes. And through the partly open door Wade Kane could see Black Diamond and Toby and Jack Santell at their table.

Toby's cheeks looked flushed and Black Diamond's poker face told him nothing. Santell was smoking a cigarette and talking in a low tone and his smile made Wade itch to smash it into a bloody pulp with his fists.

Then Biddy came back into the kitchen, angry little sparks in her Irish blue eyes. She put the two huge steaks on hot plates and when she brought Buckskin Frank and Wade Kane their suppers, her mouth was a hard, grim line.

"There's the Divil's own broth a-brewin'," she said in a whisper. "Ye'll be goin' back wi' Buckskin Frank?"

Wade Kane shook his head. "Not this trip. Not till there's another payroll or somethin' to tempt the road agent gang that ain't wiped out yet."

"Then be sure that ye walk careful," she warned him. "Ye're in danger, Wade Kane."

CHAPTER THREE

The Fight in the Casino

BIDDY MALONE owned several cabins that she rented out. She told Buckskin to show Wade to the log cabin next to his. She gave him a heavy padlock and key for the cabin door and warned him about not lighting a light till he'd pulled down the blinds.

But neither Buckskin Frank nor Wade Kane had any notion of going to bed for a few hours. Buckskin was Wade's self appointed guardian and friend and advisor. Carrying his best whip, he led the way, making the rounds of Grizzly Gulch's saloons.

Hard rock miners with their pay. Cowpunchers spending what was in the pockets of their levi overalls. Freighters and prospectors, tinhorn gamblers and tawdry looking percentage girls from the dance hall up the Gulch. Tobacco smoke and the stench of sweat and whiskey and stale beer. Sawdust on the floors and lamps that hung from ridge-logs. Gambling games of all kinds. Bartenders working doubled shifts, short changing drunks in the cheaper saloons. The crowds at the bar talking about the stage hold-up.

Buckskin Frank was plied with free drinks. With each telling, the story of the stage hold-up became a little more colorful.

"I cut the black mask plumb off one of 'em," he told it now, "with my Betsy whip. Cut it off his face. And who do you think was behind that black handkerchief, gents? One of Cuff Brophy's bulldozin' deputies! The one called Hatch. If you don't believe me, take a look at them dead road agents when the wagon fetches 'em in."

But no wagon brought in the dead bodies of the road agents. Nor were those dead men left lying there in the mud. When the storm finally cleared up before daybreak and the stars and moon came out, there were no dead men lying there beside the stage road at Road Agent Rocks. The dead men had been taken away and buried and their graves hidden.

That was what Wade Kane had expected, and when a couple of cowpunchers drifted into town and said they'd come past Road Agent Rocks and saw no dead men there, Wade was not at all surprised.

Buckskin Frank's capacity for whiskey was something to marvel at. He got no drunker than he had been all day. And he drank every drink that came his way across the bars.

Dan Kane's one higher class saloon and gambling place, named the White Elephant, and Black Diamond's Casino were the two places left to visit. And the hour was about three in the morning when the gambling games were running full blast and the bets were getting heaviest.

The two places were across the street from each other. Buckskin headed for the White Elephant, his whip cradled in the crook of his arm, its long lash carefully wound around the whipstock that was ringed half way up the stock with silver bands. He carried the whip now in a buckskin sheath.

They were crossing the muddy street when Wade Kane, who had drunk nothing but soda pop since supper, saw the shadowy form of a man crouched along the log wall of the White Elephant. More by instinct than keen eyesight he saw the movement of that crouched figure. His six-shooter slid from its holster and he shot twice as the man crouched in the dark shadows fired.

The bullet whined between Buckskin Frank and Wade Kane. That would-be killer stumbled a couple of steps and then toppled on his face.

From the saloons came the tinny banging of pianos. Nobody came out of the row of saloons to see what the shooting was about. Gun-fire was part of any celebration at Grizzly Gulch.

Buckskin Frank dragged the dead bushwhacker onto the wide plank walk, rolled him over, then struck a match.

"I don't know what his name is, Wade," he said, "but he works for the Diamond outfit. One of Black Diamond's cowhands, hired by Purty Jack Santell. You know him?"

Wade Kane shook his head. Buckskin pinched out the match flame and shook his head. Wade shoved two fresh cartridges into his six-shooter.

"You act like you was plumb used to it, Wade."

"What do you want to me do, Buck-

skin? Break out with the cold shivers?"

Buckskin Frank said it was a damned shame the way he'd spent half the night getting an edge on, then get sobered up in a split second by being shot at and missed. Wade told him it was better than being shot at and hit. His right hand was near his gun when he followed Buckskin Frank through the swinging half-doors into the White Elephant.

The place was crowded. Men were lined up at the bar. Half a dozen stud and high-stake draw poker games were going strong.

But Dan Kane was not dealing. He stood alone at the end of his long bar, a tall glass that looked like water in his hand. He set his glass on the bar and walked over to where Buckskin Frank and Wade Kane stood just inside the door.

"I've been waiting for you, Wade," he said. "Let's go into my private office. There's something I've got to talk over with you before Cuff Brophy gets back."

Wade Kane nodded. "I'll be with you again directly, Buckskin. Tell it to 'em scarey."

Inside his office, the gambler shut and bolted the door. He got a bottle and a couple of clean glasses from a drawer in his flat topped desk.

"I never drink out there. This stuff is twenty-five years old."

Then he walked over to a big safe, and worked the combination, and swung the big steel door open. He pointed to the stacks of green and yellowback currency and sacks of gold coin.

"That's the take from the five joints I own here at Grizzly Gulch. The big take is here at the White Elephant. By the time Buckskin is ready to pull out at daybreak, there'll be more, and the night's play about finished. It goes to Helena by way of Junction in that strongbox. There'll be twice as much as you had on your trip here—more than twice as much. I want you to ride shotgun guard on it on the trip back to Junction. You can name your own price for the trip."

Dan Kane shut the safe door and locked it, then he poured two drinks. Wade Kane eyed the gambler. "I wear this law badge, Dan. I don't take a dollar of outside money for anything. I've got a job to do here at Grizzly Gulch before I leave. That job might take a month."

"You won't live a month. Or a week. This money has to go out. You're the only man I can trust to guard it."

Wade Kane's mouth twisted in a faint, incredulous grin. "You'd trust me, Dan?"

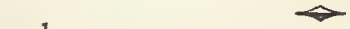
"Till hell froze over," said the gambler flatly.

"Knowin' why I come here to Grizzly Gulch?"

The gambler smiled faintly. Down the middle of his head, like a white plume, ran a snow white streak through the jet black hair. He ran his well kept hand across it now.

"I don't know how much you've heard about me, Wade. But did it ever occur to you that some of the rumors might be lies?"

"I know what you did to my father," said Wade Kane bluntly. "He was your twin brother. That's enough for me. I came here to kill you, Dan. But before I pull the trigger, I'm goin' to smash you, break you! Tromp you into the mud where you belong! I'll git enough on you to hang you and your pardner Cuff Brophy. But I won't let the Law hang you. I want to kill you with my own gun. I'll let the Law hang your pardner Cuff Brophy. Now is that all you've got to say?"



DAN KANE stood there white-lipped, like a man being struck time and again across the face with a rawhide quirt. There was no fear in his opaque black eyes. No anger. Rather it was the look of a man who is suffering the torments of a hell on earth.

Then Dan sat down slowly in his desk chair. When he lifted his drink his long fingered white hand shook so that half the whiskey slopped over the edge of the glass. He gulped it down and filled the glass again and drained it quickly.

"You'd have me risk my life to protect your damned dirty, bloodstained stolen money." Wade Kane's voice was metallic. "It's probably bait to get me killed. But that's not why I won't ride guard on it, you blackguard murderer."

Wade slid the bolt on the door and opened it. He looked back as he closed

the door behind him. The gambler sat slumped in his chair. He was reaching unsteadily for his bottle of twenty-five year old whiskey as Wade closed the door.

Wade pulled Buckskin Frank away from the bar and they walked across the street. The dead Diamond cowhand still lay there on the wide plank walk, his glazed eyes staring up at the round white moon.

The Casino was even more crowded than the White Elephant. They saw Black Diamond sitting on a stool behind a big roulette wheel that was getting a heavy play. A little behind her and to one side Toby Diamond sat in a high look-out chair. Her face was flushed and her eyes were shining with excitement. She did not see Buckskin or Wade Kane, she was so intent on watching the roulette wheel.

But Black Diamond saw them and when the wheel stopped and she had called out the winning number and color and paid bets and raked in winnings, she motioned for one of her dealers to take over. She beckoned Toby down from the look-out chair and they made their way through the crowd to where Wade Kane and Buckskin stood at the front end of the bar.

"I've got better stuff in my office, Buckskin," said Black Diamond. "Let's all go in there. I want to talk to Wade Kane."

For the second time Wade was led into an office where there was a flat topped mahogany desk and easy armchairs and a big safe. She closed and locked the door, motioning to them to be seated.

"One of your tough cowhands," blurted Buckskin Frank, "tried to murder Wade out in the street. Wade killed 'im. Yeah, one of Purty Jack Santell's tough Diamond cowhands. That spur jinglin' ramrod of yourn ain't got the guts to do his own gun chores, Black Diamond."

Black Diamond's face flushed. Her slate gray eyes were cold and hard. "There are times, Buckskin," she said quietly, "when your talk is tiresome."

Then she smiled and opened a liquor cabinet and took out a bottle and a tray of crystal glasses. And selected a bottle of dry sherry for herself and Toby.

"When do you pull out, Buckskin?"

"As always, ma'am. Daybreak."

"The play is heavy tonight. And I have a week's profits beside that to go out in the morning. I'll pay you a thousand dollars cash, Wade Kane, to ride guard on it."

Wade's grin was flat lipped. But his eyes were hard and wary.

"Five minutes ago I finished tellin' Dane Kane that I wore a law badge and lived on what salary Uncle Sam pays me. I don't take outside money. I've got a job to do here at Grizzy Gulch. When that's done, I'll go back to Helena, if I'm still alive. I'm sorry, lady, but you'll have to hire somebody else to ride herd on your gamblin' winnin's."

Black Diamond was still smiling. But there was an odd look in her slate-gray eyes that was almost like fear.

"It's gambling winnings. Toby knows that by now. She can't be hurt any more than she has been since she found out where and how her mother makes a liv-

ing. It's gambling money. But my games are straight. And I think Biddy will back me when I tell you that any money won from a man who can't afford to lose it, is paid back to him. Or to his wife or kids if he has a family. There are worse trades than gambling, Wade Kane."

"Such as killing men in cold blood!" Toby's voice was brittle. She had taken her mother's hand and was hanging onto it tightly.

"Toby, honey," said her mother. "You're all excited, youngster."

Anger had gone out of the woman's voice. She told Buckskin to pour himself a drink. That perhaps a drink all around would help. And it was not until they had set down their empty glasses that she spoke again.

"I've been tipped off tonight," she said quietly, "that my place will be held up. What money I have in the safe will be taken."

"That's what fetched Jack Santell to town?" asked Wade Kane.

"Yes."

"Why not send him along with Buckskin to ride guard on your money?"

"Santell has a round-up to run. He's gone back to camp."

Wade Kane was doing some rapid thinking. He wondered if Dan Kane had had the same sort of warning as Black Diamond. There was enough money in the two safes at these two gambling houses to tempt a man like Cuff Brophy to double-cross his pardner Dan Kane.

Then he remembered something else. It was a shot in the dark, but he gave it a try. "For a man who has ridden fifteen, twenty miles in the rain, Santell's clothes looked a little dry. No mud on his boots."

"Why do you bring that into it?" asked Black Diamond. She was smiling again. But for the fraction of a second that smile had tightened into something ugly and her eyes had hardened. "Santell is a range dude," she said. "Just between the four of us and the empty glasses I think he got word somehow that there was a pretty girl on the stage. If he stopped at the ranch the Chink would have told him about Toby.

"Santell believes in first impressions. He keeps a cabin here at Grizzy Gulch. He shaved and changed clothes there before he made his grand entrance. Nothing mysterious about that."

Buckskin Frank poured himself a big drink and downed it. There was an almost crafty look in his bloodshot eyes as he winked at Wade.

"You wouldn't trust Jack Santell," chuckled Buckskin Frank, "with that much money. Neither would I. And what's more, Black Diamond, you're lame-brained if you'd trust him outa your sight with Miss Toby. Now git on the prod about that and see if I give a damn, beggin' your pardon fer cussin' out loud!"

Instead of getting mad, Black Diamond laughed softly. Toby was frowning. But Wade Kane's eyes were bleak when he grinned at Black Diamond.

"Have your money in a strongbox at daybreak. I'll take it out on the stage with Buckskin. And I'll take all that Dan Kane has to send out in another strongbox. "He got to his feet. "Time we were goin', Buckskin."

"What," asked Black Diamond, "made you change your mind?"

"A hunch," grinned Wade Kane. "I'm playin' it out."

Wade stepped to the door with a quick stride, slid back the bolt and yanked open the door with a sudden jerk.

Jack Santell must have been leaning against the door, his ear pressed against it, listening. Because he was caught off balance and as he swayed Wade Kane's open handed slap straightened him up. That slap sounded like a small pistol. Santell's head snapped back on his neck and he went for his gun.

WADE stepped in close and there was weight and steam behind the short, vicious left and right he ripped into Santell's belly and face. The belly blow made Santell grunt. The short right caught him square on the nose. There was the brittle crunch of broken bone and blood spurted from the ramrod's smashed nose.

He had his ivory handled six-shooter out of its holster. Wade Kane grabbed his gun-hand at the wrist, jerked, twisted, pulling Santell off balance and twist-

ing his gun-arm up in a hammerlock. Santell's wind had been partly knocked out. That smashed nose blinded him with pain. Now Wade Kane was tightening the pressure on his gun arm.

"Drop that gun, Santell, or I'll bust your elbow."

Santell's fancy six-shooter clattered to the floor. Wade spun him around and hit him with a cocked right. The blow caught Santell on his smashed nose and one eye and he reeled backwards off balance, like a drunken man.

The crowd had heard the scuffle and turned from the bar to see what went on. Gambling games halted. A fight was a fight. As they started to gather, Buckskin Frank slid his whip from its buckskin sheath. He flipped back the long lash and a swivel twist of his wrist sent the buckskin lash swishing out like a striking rattler. The wide popper tore a lighted cigar from a man's mouth. The long lash came back, snapped like a pistol, flicked out again to coil around the barrel of a six-shooter and jerk it out of the hand of one of Black Diamond's bouncers. The gun was flung over the heads of the crowd and crashed into the back bar mirror. There was the crash of broken glass and above it came Buckskin Frank's bull-like bellow.

"Stand back, hombres! Let 'em fight! I'll yank an eyeball outa the next man that gits outa line."

Wade Kane grinned flatly. Then before Santell could get balanced, he tore into him. Short, wicked, punishing blows that knocked down Santell's guard and then smashed into his blood spattered face. It was vicious, brutal, savage fighting. Now Wade grabbed the front of Santell's buckskin shirt, cocked a right fist, and let him have it. Santell's knees sagged and Wade let him drop.

As Santell lay there on the floor, Wade leaned over him. "Git up on your legs, Santell! I'm just commencin' on your purty face!"

"Stop it!" screamed Toby. "Stop it!"

Black Diamond grabbed her daughter's arm and pulled her back roughly. "Quiet, Toby, or I'll lock you in!" Black Diamond's voice was quiet, toneless. "You left your Helena convent school to take a cheap schoolmarm job at Grizzly Gulch. Well, this is part of the trimmin's. If you can't take it, lock yourself in the office. No more sniveling!"

Toby shrank back from her mother as if she had been slapped. For a moment they stared hard at one another. It had been an ordeal for them both, this shock of meeting, the hold-up Toby had seen, Black Diamond's deep hurt at having her daughter discover her mother owned a gambling house and saloon.

Then Black Diamond pulled Toby close to her and held her arm around the girl's quivering shoulders.

"Stand on your feet, Santell," gritted Wade Kane. "Your hired man kinda fell down on the job when he tried to murder me. . . . Will you stand up or do you want your purty face kicked in? Mister, when I'm done workin' you over, no woman will be able to look at that face of yours without gettin' sick. Stand up, you cat-eyed lady killer!"

Wade Kane's face was bone white. His eyes glinted like red coals in the smokey lamplight. He stepped back, breathing hard, his teeth bared in a wicked grin, his fists doubled.

"Somebody give Santell a big drink," he snarled, "to warm his yellow guts."

Santell wiped the blood from his smashed nose on his buckskin sleeve. One of his eyes was already discolored and swelling shut. He spat out a mouthful of blood and drank from the whiskey bottle somebody handed him. He was on his feet, legs spread, getting balanced. His yellow-green eyes were bloodshot, slitted, wicked. The whiskey was clearing his brain, warming his belly. He must have gulped down half a pint of the raw stuff without taking the neck of the bottle from his battered mouth.

Then the half emptied bottle was gripped like a club in Santell's hand and he came at Wade Kane like a charging bull. Wade's left shoulder caught the blow meant for his head. Had it landed, it would have broken Wade's skull. Pain shot through Wade's shoulder and down to his fingers, numbing his whole arm. The bottle had smashed, splattering broken glass and spilled whiskey over the deputy marshal's shirt. And then Jack Santell was using the jagged half of the bottle as a weapon.

Wade Kane had one one good arm now. He had to move fast on his feet and he had to keep ducking that slashing bottle. The sharp pointed glass ripped his shirt, tore into his flesh, staining his shoulder and chest with blood. It looked now like Santell's fight.

Wade sidestepped and ducked and the bottle ripped the back of his flannel shirt as he crouched low and hit Santell with his shoulder. For a second Santell was knocked off balance. That second was enough. Wade Kane's right arm moved like a piston, hitting hard for the solar plexus.

His fist sank deep into Santell's belly just under his breastbone, doubling Santell up, rolling his yellow eyes back in his head. The bottle slid from his hand and he tried to grab at his belly but his arms dropped limply. Wade Kane's right fist smashed hard into the other man's battered face. Santell went down in a limp heap.

Wade Kane stood on widespread legs, his shirt ripped, blood trickling from half a dozen gashes in his chest and shoulder and back. He was breathing hard and his red-black eyes glittered savagely as he looked at Black Diamond and Toby.

"There's your fancy range dude," he said harshly. "Take care of him."

He turned to the tall, rawboned stage driver. "Let's get the hell outa here, Buckskin."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Twisted Trail of Devil Dan

AT THE feed and livery barn where the stage horses were kept, Buckskin Frank, his sheathed whip in his hand, stood spread legged and cursed his heart out in the cold gray dawn.

Save for eight or ten saddle horses in the barn and feed corral, the place was empty. Not a single horse belonging to his stage teams was there. The stage harness, still mud-spattered, hung on pegs. The empty stagecoach stood out in the wagon yard, its tongue propped and the lead bars clear of the drying mud.

The barn man was gone. His two helpers were nowhere to be seen. Somebody had bribed them to disappear or had scared them off. And someone had run off the two or three relays of stage horses that were always kept there. The gate was thrown wide open.

Biddy Malone and the doctor had dressed and bandaged Wade Kane's cuts. Now he was wearing a new store shirt and levi overalls.

"It looks," he said flatly when Buckskin Frank finally ran out of cuss words, "like somebody had set you afoot, pardner. We might as well go to our cabins and grab some shut-eye."

But before they got any of that badly needed sleep, they were going to find out something of the why and wherefor of the horse stealing that kept the stagecoach from rolling.

There was no sign of Cuff Brophy, but Dan Kane was at the stage office, standing guard with a sawed-off shotgun. The steel strongbox that held his money stood on the floor at his feet. His face looked grayish and his black eyes were bloodshot and he smelled of whiskey. Devil Dan Kane, who never took a drink at the bar, whose ordinary limit was no more than two or three drinks in his office, was a little drunk. . . .

After his fight, and when he had been patched up, Wade Kane had gone across the street to the White Elephant. He had found his uncle, Dan Kane, sitting at his desk, the bottle of twenty-five year old whiskey nearly empty. Dan had looked like a gray faced corpse.

"Git your damned money in a strongbox, Dan," Wade had told him flatly. "I'll ride shotgun guard on it when Buckskin starts."

Dan's bloodshot black eyes, red coals in an ashen gray mask, had stared hard at him. Wade had turned and walked out of the office not knowing for certain whether Dan had understood him or not. . . .

Now the gambler was here with his filled strongbox. And in a chair near the piled mail sacks and another strongbox sat Black Diamond, also armed with a sawed-off shotgun.

They stared hard at Wade Kane and Buckskin Frank. It was Wade's voice that broke the tense, unfriendly silence, "They've set Buckskin afoot for stage horses."

Dan Kane and Black Diamond turned

to look at one another. Neither of them spoke but their eyes were cold and hard and accusing.

"Where," Black Diamond's voice was tense, "is Cuff Brophy, Dan? This has all the earmarks of one of Cuff's clumsy tricks."

"I haven't seen Cuff since he came into the White Elephant about midnight to tell me that the mine superintendent Liggett, and the night watchman, had both been shot and killed at his office. They were guarding the gold bullion Liggett aimed to send out on this morning's stage."

Dan Kane lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. "Cuff Brophy said he was going to round up the bullion thieves. I haven't seen him since. . . . Brophy and I split for keeps last night."

"Why?" Black Diamond asked the question flatly.

A faint, sardonic smile moved the gambler's tight lipped mouth. "You've got only one guess coming."

Black Diamond got to her feet. She put the sawed-off shotgun back in the gun rack on the wall. Then she walked over to where Dan Kane was standing. She seemed to forget that Wade and Buckskin were standing there watching. She took the gambler's gray face in her two hands and kissed him.

Dan held his sawed off shotgun in the crook of one arm. The other arm went around Black Diamond's shoulders. A little color came back into his gray skin and his grin lost its bitterness.

"We'll both be getting religion, Lou, if we're not careful."

Wade Kane felt that he was watching something no outsider should be looking at. He pulled Buckskin aside. There was a blank look of bewilderment on the stage driver's face.

"Black Diamond," Buckskin whispered hoarsely, "and Dan Kane—worst kinda enemies, but buryin' the hatchet! Wade, I need a drink."

Wade Kane said that the drink would have to wait. They sat down on the edge of the wide plank walk. Wade spilled tobacco in a brown wheatstraw paper and rolled it into shape and lit it.

In the window of the eating place, they saw Toby eating an early breakfast. Biddy sat talking to the girl and Toby was nodding and smiling as she sipped her coffee.

"Yonder," said Wade Kane gruffly, "sits the only girl I ever wanted to marry. And, by golly, I don't even know her."

"You needn't look so damned ornery about it, son."

Black Diamond's throaty laugh from the doorway brought Wade up on his feet. He whirled around. She was smiling at him and Dan Kane, standing just behind her, grinned faintly. Buckskin Frank was chuckling.

"You've been traveling the hard way, Wade" said Black Diamond, "to get on the right trail to any girl's heart. Toby saw you kill off a few road agents. Then she had to watch you manhandle Jack Santell. None of it was pretty. The youngster's led a sort of sheltered life. Perhaps when the gunsmoke's cleared away and you change into your store clothes. . . . Savvy?"

Wade Kane grinned faintly and nodded. Then the hardness crept back into his eyes as he looked past Black Diamond at the gambler standing behind her.

"It's your play, Dan. There's a couple of loaded filled strongboxes in your stage office. Buckskin's set afoot."

"We'll put both boxes in the safe at the White Elephant," said Dan Kane. "Send a couple of Diamond cowhands after the horses that were run off last night. You and Buckskin had better grab some sleep. We'll wake you up when we've got a team harnessed for Buckskin to take out. Your best bet is to keep out of sight and trouble till it's time to pull out. You might help me with the strongboxes."

They carried the two heavy steel strongboxes from the stage office to the White Elephant. Buckskin walked in the middle, each hand holding the handle of a box. On either side of the stage driver strode Wade and Dan Kane, each gripping a box handle, a six-shooter in their free hands. And behind them walked Black Diamond, carrying Buckskin's sheathed whip and a sawed-off shotgun. Up the wide sidewalk and through the swinging doors of the White Elephant they marched.

ACROSS the street, Toby Diamond and Biddy Malone watched them. Biddy's arm was around the girl's shoulders.

"Saint Patrick and his snakes!" said Biddy. "Would ye bear witness to yander parade! 'Tis the first time Black Diamond ivver set foot in the White Elephant!"

Watching Wade, Toby Diamond shivered a little. And she was remembering how he had smashed the handsome face of Jack Santell. . . .

"It was terrible, Biddy! Inhuman!"

"A broken bottle," said Biddy Malone, "makes the divil's own weapon. But Wade Kane has a tough hide. And a brave man's heart underneath it, Toby."

"I was thinking," said Toby coldly, "of Jack Santell."

"Don't waste your colleen's tears over that scut. Had the job on his purty mug bin done twenty years ago, 'twould have saved many a lass tears and troubles. Wade Kane is a man!"

At the White Elephant, Dan Kane locked the two strongboxes in his big safe. He put two men on guard, while Black Diamond went across the street to the Casino and sent two of her Diamond cowpunchers to round up the stage horses.

Dan Kane gave Buckskin a bottle to take to his cabin. He brought out a bottle of his special whiskey and three glasses.

Wade shook his head. His refusal to drink brought a roar of indignation from Buckskin. "By hellamighty, Wade, that stuff's twenty-five years old! As fer drinkin' with Dan, didn't you see him while you was spoilin' Santell's map? Standin' with a gun in his hand and pasin' the word along that he'd kill the first man that made any kind of a gun play at you? Santell had some fightin' hombres in that Casino, rearin' to cut you down with a sneak shot. It wasn't my Betsy whip that kept them Diamond tough hands off your back, son. It was that six-shooter in the gun hand of Dan Kane."

"Blood," smiled the gambler thinly, "is thicker than crick water, Wade. Even if it's bad blood! Fill your glass."

There was something in the changed tone of Dan Kane's voice, the strange, look that came into his black eyes, that puzzled Wade. He filled his glass.

Buckskin must have noticed it also because he gave the gambler a long, searching look.

"You look like slow death, Dan," he growled, "warmed over fer breakfast."

"Hair of the dog that bit us," said Dan Kane, lifting his drink.

Buckskin Frank was not ready for bed. He had been drinking all night and then he had eaten a breakfast that would have fed half a dozen hard rocks miners just off shift. Being set afoot had topped it off. He wanted to stand at the bar and plant a foot on the brass rail, fondle his Betsy whip and talk.

"You and Cuff Brophy split the blankets, Dan. Is that on the level?" Buckskin asked.

"On the level, Buckskin. You and Wade had better get some sleep. "You'll have all day to pound your ear. Because I'll gamble all I own that your six-horse team will be in the harness and hooked up at moonrise. But not until then."

Wade cut Dan Kane a hard, quick look. "Sounds like there was a bear trap bein' set."

"Set," said the gambler, "and baited."

"What about that killin' of Liggett and the stolen bullion?"

"The bullion," said the gambler, "will be on the stage. The road agents that killed Liggett and his night watchman got a couple of leather cases filled with lead bricks. Liggett had moved the bullion to my safe while Cuff Brophy was out of the way.

"Liggett was a tough nut to crack. He wouldn't listen to me when I told him his life wasn't worth a plugged dime if he tried to lay a trap for those gold thieves. He and his bullion guard got murdered in their own trap. I liked that gent Liggett. Best superintendent we ever had."

"We?" snorted Buckskin Frank.

"We," nodded Dan Kane. "Black Diamond and I own the Grizzly Gulch Mine."

Buckskin shook his head like a man who has been hit hard and can't gather his wits.

"Don't try to figure it out, Buckskin," said Dan Kane. "Try sleepin' on it."

Buckskin Frank kept muttering into his handlebar mustache all the way to his cabin. And Wade Kane was just as bewildered. When he had left the United

States marshal's office at Helena on this assignment he thought that he had all his facts in hand. He had spent many long months puzzling out conflicting and sometimes vague reports. All of those secret reports pointed a long accusing Law finger at Dan Kane.

Cuff Brophy was labeled as a big, rather stupid, but dangerously treacherous right bower of the gambler. Dan was marked as the head of a tough, fast-shooting, hard riding road agent gang. While Black Diamond and her ramrod Jack Santell were under suspicion but without an ounce of real proof against them.

It was sunrise when Wade Kane and Buckskin Frank reached their little log cabins in the scrub pines. Buckskin grunted and pointed with his sheathed whip. Wade saw a man on horseback riding away through the scattered scrub pines at a lope.

"Timberline!" growled Buckskin. "Sets a horse like a wing flappin' scarecrow. I'd know him a-horseback on a black night in Hell!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bear Trap is Baited

THE two log cabins were close to one another. Wade Kane had gone into his cabin and was about to pull off his boots when he heard Buckskin Frank's big voice raised in bellowing wail. There was pain and anger in the sound of it, and Wade grabbed his gun as he went outside.

Buckskin stood in the doorway of his cabin. In his big hands was the remains of a broken whipstock. That it was his second best whip was some comfort, but the wrath and grief of the stage driver was bordering on the tragic.

"That Timberline done it! To git even with a man he smashed my whip. If only I could git close enough to him I'd yank out his damned eyeballs with the Betsy whip! Rip his shirt off, then peck hunks outa his hide till I'd spilt his tripes out on the ground. . . ."

It took half a quart and half an hour to calm Buckskin Frank down and get him to bed.

Wade Kane had just gotten back to his cabin when he saw Black Diamond coming through the scrub pines. She waved to him and he joined her, wondering what was on the woman's mind. They sat down on the ground that was carpeted with pine needles, and Wade rolled and lit a cigarette.

Black Diamond came to the point with characteristic frankness.

"What's the feud, Wade, between you and your uncle, Dan Kane?"

"Dan Kane killed my father, his own brother. Called him to the door of his ranch house and shot him down in cold blood."

"You're certain of that, Wade?"

"I saw it happen. It was in the middle of the night and there was a moon. I saw Dane Kane murder my father, his own blood-brother!"

"There must have been some terribly strong motive."

"They were both courtin' the same girl. She married my father. Dan and Hugh Kane—my father—were pardners in the cattle and horse business, and Dan had a gambling house on the side. He never forgave my dad for marrying the girl they both loved. And before the wedding Dan tried to poker him out of his pardnership in the ranch. Dan's luck ran out on him and he lost. That made him more bitter. Dan was a hard loser.

"Dan and dad never spoke after the wedding. Dan stayed in town at his gambling place. Dad stayed at the ranch with his bride.

"I was a fifteen year old kid. My mother had died. Her death started my father drinkin'. . . . This was down in Texas, along the Mexican Line. Where the boze is tequila and mescal and the men are tough. . . .

"Nearly every Border cowman handled wet cattle outa Mexico, shovin' 'em acrost the Rio when the moon was right. And my dad got mixed up with some tough hombres.

"Dan Kane had a big gamblin' house. I'd seen him in town but my dad wouldn't let me speak to him. But Dan was like he is now, a neat dresser and a kid's idea of a cowboy-gambler. And Dan Kane had a rep as a gun-fighter. He always dressed in black.

"That's how I knew it was Dan that night. The rider wore a black hat, black

shirt, black leather chaps. A silver mounted saddle and bridle on his black horse. Dan's horse and outfit.

"My father had just come outa Mexico with a drive of wet cattle. He'd gone to bed drunker than I'd ever seen him.

"I heard the horsebacker comin' and woke my dad. He'd laid down on the bed with his clothes on. Said he had only a few hours to sleep before he pulled out again to settle with his rustler pardners.

" 'Dan Kane's ridin' up,' I told my dad. 'I recognized his horse and silver-mounted outfit. Dan in his black clothes.'

" 'Dan Kane,' said my dad, and he grinned wide, 'is the one man I shore want to talk to!'

"He stepped to the front door and pulled it open. He didn't have a gun on him. Dan Kane shot him six times, so fast that he'd gone again on a dead run before I savvied what had happened.

"And that," said Wade Kane flatly, "was the last time I saw Dan Kane till we met here at Grizzy Gulch. I aimed to kill him the day of my father's funeral. But he'd sold his gamblin' house and disappeared. Quit Texas.

"I had to stay and run the ranch. A Texas Ranger kinda taken my part and helped me along, till I got a chance to sell out.

"Then I taken Dan Kane's trail. My money ran out, and I went to work punchin' cows along the trail. I never stayed long with one outfit. Just drifted. Always cuttin' for Dan's sign.

"I reached Montana, got a job as United States deputy marshal. Then I located Dan Kane. When I had enough news about him and his pardner Cuff Brophy, I asked for the job of wipin' out the road agent gang that was robbin' the mail and express on the Grizzly Gulch and Junction stage line. My main idea was to kill Dan Kane. But before I killed him I wanted to take away everything he had. Smash him. Then empty my gun into him. That's the feud between me and Dan Kane, ma'am."

Wade's voice was harsh and ugly. He got to his feet and helped Black Diamond to hers. They brushed off the pine needles and faced one another.

"Dan Kane," said Black Diamond, "is a square gambler. But he's been mixed up too much with Cuff Brophy. I've seen Dan kill a man or two, but he gave them an even break. I can't believe he killed his own brother in cold blood without giving him a fighting chance. Did you give him a chance to tell his story, Wade?"

"Dan knows why I'm here," said Wade Kane. "He's got nothin' to say. I saw him kill my father."

"You saw a man dressed in Dan Kane's clothes, riding his horse, using his saddle and bridle. It was night. Before you get quick-triggered, Wade, ask Dan Kane if he killed his brother."

She held out her hand like a man. "Will you promise me that? Shake on it? It means a lot to me."

Wade Kane shook hands on it. Black Diamond's slate gray eyes had softened. Her voice was throaty.

"Thanks, Wade. Now get your sleep."

She turned and walked away through the scrub pines.

IT WAS getting dark when Buckskin Frank awoke Wade Kane by pounding on his cabin door.

"Rattle your hocks, Wade. Wash up and we'll take on a wolf bait of Biddy's grub. We're pullin' out directly."

The three relays of six-horse stage teams had been driven in about sundown at the feed yard, fetched in by a couple of Diamond cowhands. Buckskin superintended the harnessing and hooking up of his team while Wade Kane finished his supper.

Wade crossed the street to the stage office. The door was closed and bolted, the blinds pulled. Wade rapped on the door. Dan Kane opened it and let Wade in. And the young deputy marshal got quite a shock.

Dan Kane had shaved off his black mustache. He was wearing levi overalls, a blue flannnel shirt, rusty looking boots and an old, light-colored Stetson.

"My clothes are in the back room, Wade. They'll fit you. Put 'em on. You'll find a saddled horse tied in the brush. A big black gelding with a fancy silver mounted outfit. Mine. There's a stage mustache and some theatrical glue to fasten it on with. You're Devil Dan Kane

when you ride away from town in the dark.

"I'm ridin' shotgun guard with Buckskin. This changing identities might seem locoed to you. But I've got a mighty powerful reason for it. . . . You've traveled a long trail, Wade, to hunt me down. And I've traveled the wolf-end of that same trail. It's been tough on both of us. I didn't kill your father, Wade.

"That's as much as I have time to tell you right now. If my luck plays out and I get killed tonight, Black Diamond has a sealed letter to give you that tells the story. Now shed those clothes and get into mine. You'll find a can of black stuff to rub onto your tow head."

Dan Kane's grin was genuine and his black eyes were hard and bright with excitement. His voice had lost its flatness.

"Black Diamond told me to put it up to you, Dan. You beat me to it. You didn't kill my father?"

"I didn't kill your father, Wade." He held out his hand. "I don't lie."

Wade had to believe the man. He gripped the proffered hand and it was hard and steady and firm. . . .

When Wade came into the office from the back room, dressed in Dan's black outfit, the gambler grinned his approval.

The stagecoach rolled up outside. Dan Kane dimmed the lamp. He opened the stage office door, and he and Wade loaded the mail sacks, two heavy strongboxes and some heavy leather cases that held the gold bullion bricks from the Grizzly Gulch mine.

The light from the open doorway of the stage office came out dimly, and even Buckskin Frank was fooled by the disguised men.

"Get your horse," Dan Kane told Wade in a low tone. "Follow the stage. It'll be stopped at Road Agent Rocks. I'll give Buckskin his orders on the way there. I don't know how many road agents there'll be. Three, anyhow, perhaps half a dozen, all told. Shoot first and shoot to kill. Good luck. Be happy some day with little Toby Diamond."

The disguised Dan Kane, hat pulled low, climbed up on the driver's seat alongside Buckskin Frank. Buckskin kicked off his brake. His Betsy whip cracked like a pistol. The six-horse team hit their collars and the stagecoach swayed and pitched as it pulled out in the rain.

Biddy Malone stood in her restaurant doorway, waving good-bye to Buckskin. Behind her stood Black Diamond and Toby.

Wade Kane in his black outfit, ducked around the corner of the stage office and hit a run. He found the big black horse with its silver mounted saddle and bridle, a carbine shoved in the saddle scabbard. He swung into the saddle and hit a long lope. When he sighted the stagecoach he slowed to a trot and followed it.

Wade had time to think now. And his thoughts were disturbing. This changing of clothes and Dan Kane riding shotgun guard with Buckskin Frank had all the earmarks of a clever trap.

Those Helena reports furnished almost certain proof that the gambler was the real head of the road agent gang. It would be easy enough for Dan to give Buckskin orders to halt the stage. He and his road agent outfit might swap a few shots, taking care to shoot high over each other's heads. And when Wade charged up on horseback to lend the shotgun guard a hand, they'd shoot him down before he got his gun warm.

And, if Black Diamond was also mixed up in this road agent business she had played her cards exactly right. Using her daughter Toby to soften Wade Kane, pumping Wade's story out of him, exacting a promise from Wade to give Dan Kane a chance to talk his way out. Then Dan's denial of his brother's killing. With only his gambler's word to back it. . . .

Dan Kane and Black Diamond were both gamblers. They were playing for high stakes. Wade Kane had left Helena to take chips in the same big game. He'd shot hell out of some road agents, so Cuff Brophy had murdered one wounded road agent and another who might have talked. And Wade had thrown such a scare into them all that they were setting the bear trap for him. Dan had rushed him into it, giving him no time to think it over. But now, out in the cool night air, his brain clearing, Wade was getting a real slant on the deal.

A Diamond cowhand had tried to kill him last night and failed. Black Diamond's ramrod, Jack Santell, had stayed

in town to kill him and had finished up with his handsome face smashed out of shape. And Liggett, who had hinted that he had something to tell the United States deputy marshal, had been murdered. Added to all that, Cuff Brophy had disappeared because he dared not shoot it out with a U. S. law officer. Looking back on it all, the whole deal was plain enough now.

This was a bushwhacker trap to catch the law officer who threatened their lives and freedom.

It was a neat trap. He was wearing Dan Kane's clothes, riding Dan's horse. And in his haste he had forgotten to unpin his United States deputy marshal badge from the flannel shirt he'd left in the back room of the stage office. They could kill him now and swear it was all a mistake. They'd mistaken him for Dan Kane. There wouldn't be so much as his law badge on his bullet-riddled body when Marshal Cuff Brophy "discovered" his dead body at Road Agent Rocks.

Black Diamond and Dan Kane, gamblers, had the brains to plan a trap as cunning as this. Toby was just bait for the bear trap. But at least she was honest about it. She couldn't hide her loathing for him.

Biddy Malone and Buckskin Frank, then, were the only ones who were on the level. And that damned Timberline had been sent to Buckskin's cabin to destroy the only valued thing the whiskey loving stage driver owned. His whip. That was a sample of their cunning vindicative planning.

The stagecoach was less than a mile from Road Agent Rocks when Wade Kane loped his big black gelding around it on the flat stretch of benchland. He swung wide around, beyond rifle shot range. He heard Dan Kane shout at him, and heard Buckskin's shout, but he could not make out the words. He rode around and out of sight in the scrub pines and patches of buckbrush. Then he approached Road Agent Rocks by a dim trail that wound its snakelike way through patches of boulders.

It was moonlight and the waiting road agents had no need to build bonfires to light up the scene. They sat their horses, black handkerchiefs pulled up across the lower part of their faces, guns in their hands. They were hidden from the stage road by the huge granite boulders, but were visible to Wade Kane.

They had not seen or heard Wade's approach along the brushy trail. They watched the six-horse stagecoach as it came along, Buckskin cracking the whip.

As the stage coach entered the pass between the high boulders, three of the riders rode out to block the way. Buckskin kicked on his brake and pulled his team to a halt. And Wade Kane got a sudden rude awakening.

Wade saw Dan Kane, shotgun guard, rap Buckskin over the head with his carbine barrel and shove the stage driver into the boot and out of the line of fire. And then the gambler crouched low on top of the coach between the tarp covered piles of baggage and two strongboxes. His carbine spewed short streaks of fire. He had shot two of the road agents out of their saddles before Wade had time to go into action.

He went in with a rush, taking the three riders on his side of the road. He spurred his big black gelding into them. Wade Kane's gun was spitting death.

He got one of the three, took a shot at another, and then a heavy slug tore at his right shoulder. He had to grab his gun in his left hand. A bullet seared his ribs and another shot ripped his thigh. He was missing the two men who were shooting at him. He heard Cuff Brophy's rasping curse, calling him Dan. And the other road agent's black handkerchief had slipped down. It was Jack Santell.

They were in behind the boulders and out of sight of the stagecoach. Wade's gun-hammer snapped on an exploded shell and he dropped the empty six-shooter and jerked his carbine. But the big black gelding pitched and threw him.

As Wade rolled in behind the rocks, he saw Dan Kane on foot running around the boulders. Crouching a little, the gambler stood with a blazing six-shooter in his hand, shooting Cuff Brophy out of his saddle. Then Dan Kane's knees were bending and he was swaying back and forth, holding his six-shooter in both hands.

Wade was dizzy, and he had only his left arm and hand to work his carbine.

He used all his strength and wits now as he thumbed back the hammer of the carbine and pulled the trigger. He saw Santell topple sideways onto the rocks.

Out on the stage road there was more commotion. Buckskin's voice was roaring, the whiplash popping. And there was Timberline's hoarse, terrified screaming.

Cuff Brophy and Jack Santell were both dead. Timberline, badly wounded and riding for a fast getaway, had passed too close to the stagecoach. Buckskin, stunned by the rap on the head that had been meant to get him out of the line of fire, went into swift action.

The long, sixteen-foot lash sped out, wrapped itself twice around Timberline's neck, cutting and burning deep into his flesh as Buckskin yanked him out of his saddle. Every time that long lash sped out, its wide buckskin popper took a little chunk of skin and flesh from Timberline's face. He rolled on the ground, writhing and screaming.

"Don't, Buckskin! I'm a-dyin'!"

Wade crawled across the dead bodies of Santell and Cuff Brophy to where Dan Kane lay. The gambler recognized him a grin spread across his white face.

"We got 'em, Wade. . . . But you shouldn't have rode on ahead like that and into it alone. Buckskin damn' near killed his horses in a race to beat you here. Yonder lies the man that stole my clothes and horse down on the Border and killed your dad, my brother Hugh.

"He calls himself Cuff Brophy. He was one of Hugh's Border-jumper cattle rustlers. The night when they quarreled over their last cattle drive, Cuff killed Hugh and came back to town. Those who saw him mistook him for me.

"He changed back to his own clothes and horse and pulled out. I had to sell out that night and quit the country before I was grabbed and hung for a murder I didn't do. That's the truth of it. But it wasn't till yesterday that I got proof that Cuff Brophy was the murderer.

"I've never had any part of this road agent game, Wade. But Cuff Brophy knew I was wanted in Texas for my brother's murder. He blackmailed me into keeping my mouth shut. That's why I changed clothes with you. I knew he wouldn't shoot me. . . .

"Black Diamond got the truth from Cuff Brophy, and she passed it on to me for what it was worth. There's a woman, Wade. She's on the level. I'd hoped to marry her, when I'd cleaned my slate. But it looks now like it ain't in the cards. The bullet with my name on it is in my chest. . . ."

Dan Kane coughed. He lay back, white as alkali, blood trickling from tightly grinning lips.

There was the rattle of a buckboard and Black Diamond's voice.

Buckskin lifted Dan Kane and Wade from the ground and carried them to the thick mattress on the floor of Black Diamond's buckboard.

The doctor from Grizzly Gulch was there, too. And Toby Diamond, in a starched white dress like a nurse's uniform. Toby wiped the blood and dirt from Wade's face and told him he had to get well because she wanted him to.

Wade forced a grin and told Toby that he reckoned he'd live if she'd promise to marry him.

She kissed him and said it was a deal. . . .

* * *

It took a month for Dan Kane to recover, and even then the Grizzly Gulch doctor said it was some kind of a miracle. Dan said, "Miracle, hell!" That it was skilled surgery and Black Diamond's nursing. The only miracle about it was that Black Diamond was going to be Mrs. Dan Kane.

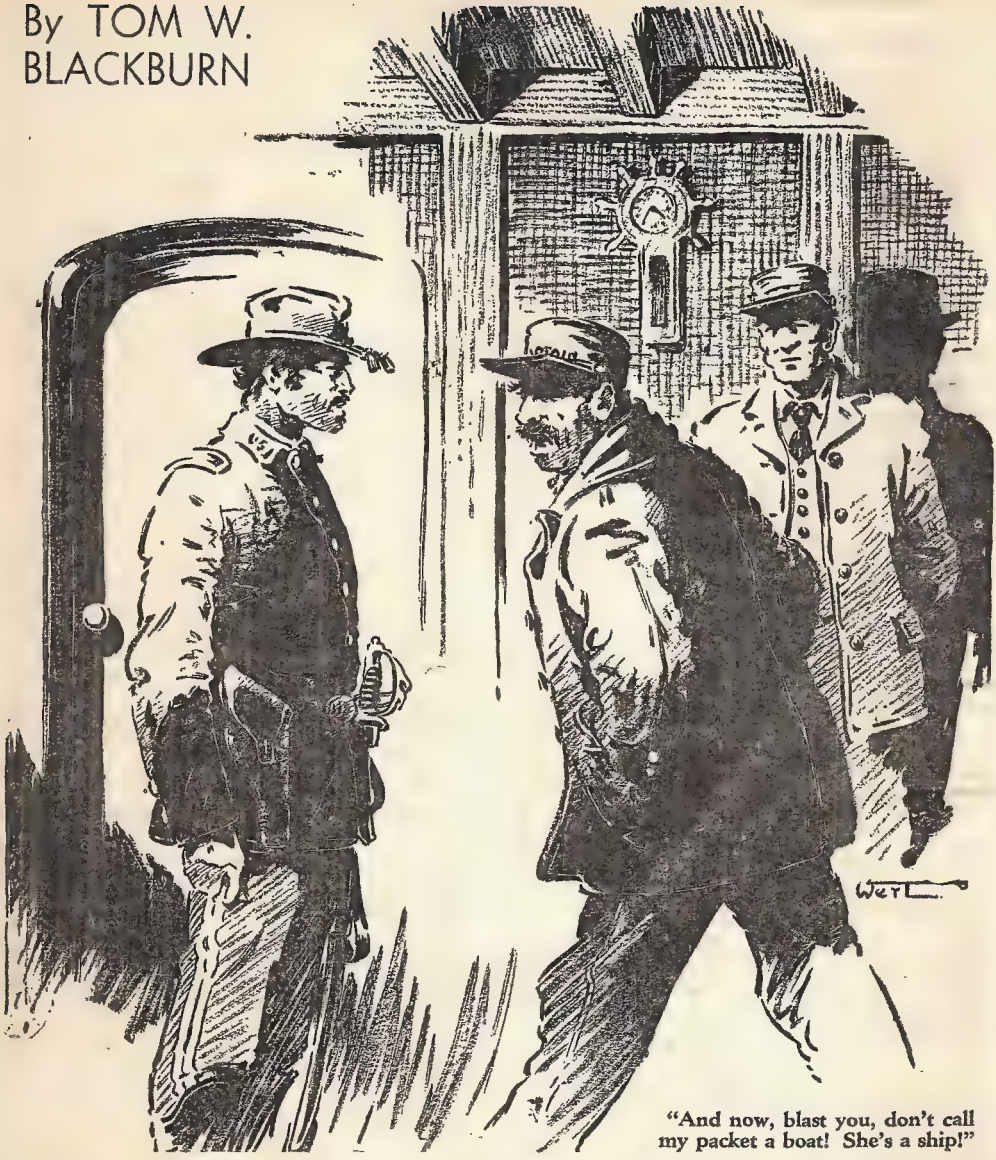
So Grizzly Gulch was treated to the only triple wedding it had ever seen, when Wade Kane and Toby Diamond, Dan Kane and Black Diamond, Buckskin Frank Jones and Biddy Malone were all married in the hushed big room of the Casino.

The preacher looked a little bewildered when Buckskin Frank handed him a stage whip in a buckskin sheath.

"Just hold it," said Buckskin, "till you git the weddin' harness on the six of us and git us hooked up right. Wade and Toby workin' in the lead, Dan and Black Diamond the swing team, Buckskin and Biddy the wheelers. Then kick off the brakes, Parson, and pop your whip!"

THE END

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



"And now, blast you, don't call my packet a boat! She's a ship!"

MISSOURI RIVER DEVIL

When red hell broke loose on the Missouri River packet *Pacific*, and a hundred tough gun-hands took over the upper decks, Engineer Jim Kenny and ebony-skinned Missoula Sam swore that their own brawn and muscle could do the work of drop-forged steel and searing steam!

BIG JIM KENNY, engineer on the packet *Pacific*, drove his shoulders into the press ahead, a premonition slicing through him like a knife. Uncle John Payne was the dean of the Missouri, the best muddy-water pilot on the river. But it was fair betting that one day his love of whiskey—together with the fact that Uncle John had a pilot's positive conviction that no living mortal was his equal

—would bring a sudden end to a long and colorful career. And the bet was almost as good that tonight, when he was needed urgently, Uncle John would have hunted himself out some first-class trouble.

Jim had gotten as far as the Bucket of Blood on his search of the bars for Uncle John, when he heard the shot. He had run half a block with the pistoning strides of a man in a hurry. But the throng of the curious which peopled St. Joe's streets in these times of restless Westward movement had formed a jam before he reached the spot. As he wedged himself through, the crowd parted and a man squeezed out. He ducked under Jim's elbow, and Jim got only a quick impression of a small man with a heavy beard and the tallow-smelling buckskins of the frontier. Then the man was gone, darting into the shadows across the street.

A moment later, Jim was on his knees beside old John Payne. The pilot's coat was plastered with dust where he had rolled with the impact of a bullet which had torn a great hole through him. His faded eyes had a look of pleading as they fastened on Jim. Uncle John, at long last up against something he couldn't bluff down as king of the river, wanted help. And there wasn't any help for that kind of wound.

Jim Kenny had learned all he knew of the river, had gained his prized berth on the *Pacific,* through John Payne.

"Who was it?" he asked softly.

"Get me back to the packet, son," Uncle John whispered. "She's a queen—she's got to have the best damned pilot. . . ."

The words trailed off. Jim straightened. A man in the crowd bent close.

"I seen it!" he said. "Gent just walked up to the old boy, jerked a gun, and cut him down. No reason or nothing. Gent named Handley. Thick beard—two guns to his belt. Bad hombre from up-river. Fur-man, a flat-boater and a pirate, I've heard."

In the distance a deep, commanding roar vibrated in the air. That would be Cap Tibbets, hauling on the whistle-chain. Sailing time! Jim caught the arm of the man who had identified Uncle John's killer.

"Where'd I find this Handley—right quick?" he ground out.

"He skinned off jest as you come up. No tellin' where he'd be, now. Likely at the Wagon-Hub with the rest of the river-rats!"

Down at the wharves, the *Pacific's* whistle blared again, a series of short, insistent blasts. Jim's hands tightened until the knuckles were white.

He was thinking of a quick, vague impression of a man in trapper's gear who had slid under his elbow and run into the shadows at the edge of the crowd. But if the *Pacific* sailed without him, her engines—the most beautiful, powerful monsters on the river—would go up-stream under the careless hand of Missoula Sam, his black fireman.

Abruptly, he jammed the fringe of the crowd out of his way. St. Joe would have to take care of Uncle John, for he was part of St. Joe's legend. As for Handley, quick-gun trapper, Jim Kenny would take care of him—wherever he was, and however long it took—when this special, forced-draft run of his packet was finally done!

THE *PACIFIC* lay for three hundred feet along the wharf, a thing of beauty in the torch light. Built for the Louisville-New Orleans run, for the traffic of rich Creole and Bluegrass gentlemen and their ladies, it was a quirk of shifting trade that had brought this queen of the river up here onto the Missouri and its jumping-off places into the Indian-troubled frontier.

Her rails were crowded now with passengers who would have once been scorned by her owners—trappers, scouts, fur men, gamblers, and river-roughs. Even a company of soldiers to guard a shipment of Army gold stacked in the ornate main saloon.

The crowd looked curiously down from the rails, wondering at the delay and watching Jim Kenny's big figure race toward them. But Jim didn't see the staring faces. Only that of Cap Tibbets, appoplectic beside the gangplank.

Cap started a reverberating roar of anger as Jim made the plank in two strides. Jim stopped him with a look, ducking into Cap's cabin. Tibbets fol-

lowed, his face suddenly grave. Lieutenant Chalmers, commanding officer of the Army detachment aboard, crowded after Cap.

Jim shut the door. "Uncle Johnny's dead!" he said.

Cap swelled up like a balloon, then suddenly let the wind sigh out wordlessly. Jim swiftly detailed the old pilot's death. Cap scrubbed the stubble on his chin with a fumbling hand. Finally he turned to the lieutenant.

"Well, Chalmers," he said uncertainly, "it looks like your men at Council Bluffs will have to wait a couple of days longer for their supplies. I've got to find me a pilot."

"A couple of days!" Chalmers exploded. "Hell, man, there may not be any soldiers left alive at the Bluffs when we get there, if we're delayed that long. You've got a thousand rifles and a hundred thousand rounds of ammunition on this boat. Those men at the Bluffs are cut off from relief from Fort Leavenworth by land. There's an army of renegade traders and the Sioux Nation between us and them. And they'd give their shirts to keep guns away from the Bluffs, and they'd give more to get 'em themselves.

"Any day they're apt to rush the detachment here. If they do, our boys are sunk without these guns and ammunition. If we don't get up river, everything we've gained on the plains will be lost. Might be even a couple of years before wagons could roll West again. Put somebody else at your wheel and shove off!"

Cap Tibbets laid his cap carefully on the table. He ran the fingers of both hands through his thin hair. Watching these things, Jim Kenny felt a little sorry for the Army man. He was about to be dressed down in a way he would remember a long time.

"Lieutenant," Cap said slowly, "a pilot handles the wheel of the *Pacific* for one reason only. To keep her floating! To do that, he has to know every turn, current, snag, and bar in the river. Men that know those things don't grow on trees. I've made this run over a hundred times since I brought the packet up here, but I don't know the river yet. And I'm a river-man! You find me a pilot, and we'll go. Don't, and we'll sit till I do. And now, blast you, while you're being told, don't call my packet a *boat!* She's a ship!"

Lieutenant Chalmers flushed and jerked the door open. He avoided Cap's glare, snapping his command at Jim.

"Get up a full head of steam, Engineer! This is government business, and the government expects a record run. I'll have a pilot aboard in half an hour!"

The officer turned, vaulted the rail, and strode angrily off across the wharf. Cap Tibbets watched him go with a wry smile. He nudged Jim's elbow.

"Well, Engineer," he said with mock gruffness, "you heard your orders. A full head of steam, by hell!" He snorted. "I reckon you'll have time enough to come in the bar and have a drink with me to old Johnny Payne. Johnny wouldn't feel so bad about that lead in his brisket if he knew he'd made the United States Army go out to hire somebody in his place. But it'd make him a mite hostile to know the Army figured it could do it in twenty minutes!"

CAP TIBBETS and his engineer were still at the *Pacific's* bar when young Chalmers came back. If the officer disapproved of the bottles before the two men, he said nothing. He was obviously fighting his way through his first big responsibility and making heavy going of it. He presented the man with him to Tibbets.

"Captain, this is Abe Sanders. He appears to be competent, and he's volunteered to pilot us up river in exchange for passage."

Cap ran his eye over the man. But before he could say anything, Jim Kenny stepped forward, setting his fingers painfully into the man's elbow. Sanders wore the smelly leather of a fur-man, and he had a heavy beard. He was short and quick on his feet and wore two guns thrust through his belt.

Jim recalled the furtive figure which broke from a crowd and ran for shadows across a jammed street. He wasn't quite sure, but. . . .

"What was the name again, brother?" he said softly. "Handley?"

The man turned a quick, cold glance on

Jim, holding it without a flicker while he jerked his arm free. And Jim caught a flash of warning in the eyes.

"Sanders!" the man corrected sharply. Jim stepped back, his own eyes narrow. Cap teetered forward on his toes.

"And where did you get him, Chalmers?"

"The Army has learned not to waste time, Captain Tibbets!" Chalmers snapped. "We can't afford to waste two days recruiting a replacement. I was inquiring at the Wagon Hub. Sanders volunteered. We had arrangements made in five minutes!"

"The Wagon Hub!" Cap snorted. "A damned hangout for squawmen and buffalo killers! Why, hell, Chalmers, no self-respectin' river-man'd be seen dead of a buffalo be!" he raged. "But God, Himself, could no more keep me out of my own wheel-house when I'm under way than He can make a regular pilot out of that chunk of horsemeat!"

Cap plowed out of the cabin. Jim could hear him angrily stumping up the ladder to the top deck.

Sanders swung to Jim. "Don't get my name mixed again, mister!" he grated. Then he stepped onto the deck and followed Tibbets up the ladder.

Jim watched him for a moment, then crossed to the little door letting onto the head of the fire-room ladder. Sanders was a flinty killer, just as sure as he was the Handley who had slipped out of the crowd on St. Joe's street. But what was he doing volunteering for the job of the

You Bet We'll Remember Pearl Harbor, Wake Island, and Bataan! And we'll remember, too, that the U. S. War Savings Bond we buy this week may furnish the bomb that sends one of Hirohito's warships on a trip where it will never threaten us again! Insure our freedom every pay-day by buying War Bonds and Stamps!

in front of that dive. You go back and try again. The *Pacific* can't be handled with a few cuss-words and a bull-whip, like a Conestoga wagon!"

Sanders stabbed a stubby finger into Cap Tibbets' big belly. "Lissen, you bloated old beaver," the man ground out, "I been travelin' this stretch of river for fifteen years! I've poled a flatboat up and down her for more trips than you'll ever make in this perambulating coffin! Now, jest keep your paws off'n the wheel an' your nose out'n the wheel-house and jump when I say. I'll take your damned packet a sight closer to the Bluffs with her bottom still in her than you'd ever get her without me!"

Cap's florid face turned nearly black.

Lieutenant Chalmers stepped between the two men and faced Cap. "We've got to get up river! If not with your pilot, then with mine, Captain. I'll have to make those orders! Stay out of the wheel-house and instruct your crew to work with Sanders as though he was the regular pilot."

Cap swore defiantly. "I'll leave the son man he had killed? When the answer turned up for that one, Jim Kenny could square old John Payne's last account. Until then, the river was running and the *Pacific* had work to do.

He hooked the polished brass hand-rails at the top of the ladder and slid below....

SOME time after midnight Missoula Sam, Jim's huge Negro fireman, turned in for a nap on the cordwood in the bins aft of the engines. For three hours, Jim helped the two apprentices keep the fires level and the hickory logs roaring in the boilers. When Sam awoke and went back on duty, Jim made his oiling rounds. The gleaming "push-and-pullers," one to either side, sighed rythmically, matching the prideful pulse in Jim's own body. His engines cared for, Jim glanced up at the steering-chains running along either side wall from the big wheel winch under the pilot house back to the rudder. They sawed back and forth with sure strokes as the new pilot, high above, spun the wheel.

Jim's early alarm that Sanders was a complete fake faded as he watched the play of the chains. Here was a competent steersman at the wheel. Yet, he was troubled. Sanders—or Handley—must have killed Johnny Payne just to get aboard this packet. He was sure of that. It tied in, somehow, with the arms the *Pacific* was running north. And it spelled a lot of grief, written large and ominous, for the packet and her crew.

Other boats could take the risks of river traffic as they came—but not the *Pacific*. She was queen of the river—something special. And she was powered by the most beautiful engines on water—Jim Kenny's engines—and his pride.

His concern growing, Jim swung up the ladder to the river-deck, past two more levels teeming with rough passengers, to the cyclone deck back of the white and gilt wheel-house.

Cap Tibbets was against the rail here, a pipe between his teeth and his eyes reaching up the river through the thin light of the false dawn. He listened Jim out thoughtfully. Finally, he knocked the dottle from his pipe and leaned far out over the rail, waving his hand toward the decks below.

"Ain't no doubt Sanders is as ringy as they come," he agreed. "But he ain't no magician! It's possible he's one of the renegades that's been puttin' bees in the britches of the Sioux, tradin' 'em guns and whiskey. But he's bit off a chunk he can't chew if he aims to tackle my packet! I don't care if he's got a regiment of pardners waitin' somewheres along the river. He can't get the *Pacific* inshore where they could get aboard her. I'm watchin' him too close.

"If I ain't enough, there's Chalmers and his soldiers. If Sanders plugged Johnny Payne—and you ain't a man to forget a face, Jim—I'll see him hung for it when the run's done! But I ain't worried about him and my ship."

Cap's confidence seemed logical enough. Sanders was only one man, after all. But when Jim turned back to the fire-hole, he went unwillingly, still troubled by the vaguess of a fear which refused to take clear shape in his mind.

That afternoon Sanders brushed the *Pacific's* bottom across a bar. But it was a light blow and nothing unusual in upriver travel on the Missouri. The soldiers of Lieutenant Chalmers' command lazed about the river-deck, keeping to the shade cast by the overhang of the promenades above. The mixed press of passengers drifted down from the upper decks to the same shelter as the heat grew. Twice Jim poked his head up from below, seeing nothing untoward in this. The packet, running at the limit set on the governors on her engines, was hanging a record. There was nothing else unusual.

Late in the afternoon, Missoula Sam slammed the door of the boiler he had been charging with fresh logs and stopped beside Jim.

"Mistah Jim, I got the crawlers," the huge black man said earnestly. "They's been climbin' up an' down my neck since las' night! And they's gittin' wuss! The ole river's lickin' his chops. I'se riverborned and I know. Old River-Devil aims to git his fingers into this here packet's belly and tear her innards out!"

"Nonsense, Sam!" Kenny snapped. It irritated him that the fireman should feel his own uneasiness. "We'll be wharfed at the Bluffs inside an hour or two. And nothing's going to happen before. . . ."

The words died in Jim's throat.

Pandemonium broke out suddenly on the river-deck, directly overhead—shouts, the scuffle of booted feet, the muted snapping of guns fired at close range. The door at the ladder-head jerked open and Cap Tibbets lurched down into the fire-hole. Words boiled up so thickly in Tibbets' throat he could scarcely get them out. He had an ugly bullet-hole in one thigh.

"Sanders!" he choked. "Dirty, backstabbin' pirate son! He's took my ship! All them tough passengers in his men. They got amongst the soldiers and come close to wipin' Chalmers' boys out to the last brass button. But that kid's all right, by hell! He got a good part of his company out'n that squeeze and back in the stern, from the paddle-wheels aft. The rest of the packet's took over, complete, and they're headin' for a point on the far bank!"

Jim's eyes leaped to the door at the ladder-head. In moments somebody would discover where Cap had gone, or

they'd think of the men below decks. The door would have to be blocked.

Jim turned Cap over to one of the two apprentices and barked at Sam. Swiftly they fell to, rigging a line out of spare pipe. Efficient as Jim Kenny kept his below-decks crew, no pipe line had ever been so swiftly fitted. But Jim was still struggling with a tie-in at the boiler when the door flung open and men started down the ladder. One of them shouted an order.

"More steam down there, damn you! Get them engines working! More steam!"

Jim grinned mirthlessly, dropped his wrench on the last turn, and seizing the wheel of the valve he had just fitted, cracked it wide. With a roar, the charge of the boilers snarled through the hastily-rigged line to spew out a searing, destructive ram of steam up the angle of the ladder and into the open doorway.

The pack on the ladder-head screamed hoarsely and fought madly out onto the deck. Jim raced back to Cap Tibbets. Cap grunted appreciatively.

"Good boy, Jim! But we've got to do something about steering. They aim to run us aground on that point, and they've got pack-horses to take off our freight!"

There was no way to see out of the fire-hole. And a man had to see to steer. Jim measured swiftly with his eyes, then climbed up onto a boiler with an axe. Choosing a place in the side-wall of the *Pacific* between a pair of ribs and just under the deck above, he drove the steel deep.

More of Sanders' men rushed the fire-room door and one of them smashed a shot into the fire-hole. One of the apprentices got to Jim's valve and slammed another jet of steam upward into their faces.

They backed off. Jim's axe bit desperately, and the *Pacific's* oak planking gave slowly. Then, suddenly, a hole was open to the outside in the narrow freeboard between the water-line and the overhang of the river-deck.

Jim and Missoula Sam hoisted Cap Tibbets up to the improvised porthole, since his judgment of steerage was best. He got his head out the hole, took one look, and hauled it back.

"The double-damned, tadpole-spawning mud-cats!" he howled. "We're nigh ashore. Two hundred yards and our bottom'll be stove in under us! If we could steer, we could haul this cargo of pirates right into the garrison at the Bluffs. Chalmers has got 'em blocked so they can't jump off aft the paddles. If they jump off forward of 'em, they'll get mince-meated proper!" Cap's voice trailed off into a smoking, impotent wail.

Jim was at the tool-box again, hauling out a sledge and a heavy chisel. Later, he wondered how Sam and he had cut the huge steering-chains. He was aware that two more rushes were made at the door, and that last time the kid on the valve had just left it open, effectively keeping the doorway clear, but flooding the firehole with a choking fog of scattering steam.

Staggering over to where the two kids crouched, Jim dropped the sledge and ordered the apprentices up onto the steam-domes atop the boilers to tie down the pop-valves.

When they came down, he barked at them again. "Each of you take a firebox and get all the wood into it you can cram. Leave the door open and open the doors on the ash-pits. Get us some draft. We're going up-river. And Sam, you get hold of the loose end on that other chain!"

Sam grinned, spat on his hands, and crossed to the far side of the fireroom. Red light, playing from the roaring fires out over the steam-shrouded hold, made an inferno in which sweat-grimed men moved, buffeted by the hammering roar of the draft and the flames. Over this tumult, Cap Tibbets thunderingly pleaded for more haste.

Jim bent, picking up the chain at his feet. Across, he saw Sam follow suit. The *Pacific* was steered by a winch. The chains were cut back of the winch-drum. Jim had no idea how heavy the pull of the rudder on these chains would be. But it was the only way the packet could be handled from below the decks—by the see-sawing power in a giant black and a slab-muscled engineer!

Cap saw they were set and howled for a turn. Jim hauled on his chain, Sam slackening on the other. Through the huge links, Jim could feel the power of the river and the lashing of the paddle-wheels, churning faster now as pressures built up in the straining boilers.

For a long moment Jim thought those

restless forces would drag him across the floor, that the whole thing had been a vain hope. Then, suddenly, there was a little give. He took in a yard of chain—two yards—backing across the floor. The packet heeled gently. At his porthole, Cap began to swear gleefully.

"Good! Good! Slack her off. Now, back a little. That's her! We've got her, boys! With the devil on her fantail and river-men in her belly, the *Pacific's* back in channel. Army, here we come!"

Heat built up in the firehole. Sweat poured from Jim's braced and straining body. His arms and shoulders ached numbingly. The chain ranged away tautly from him toward the rudder arm far aft. He watched it whip and sag as it fought him. Steam was whistling around the tied-down pop-valves.

The firebox was too bright for the naked eye. The two apprentices were crouched down fearfully, their task of fueling forgotten. But it was all right.

Jim's eyes touched the boilers, wondering if he could already detect river's springing under the mounting pressure. The heart of the ship was a firelighted, savage hell which shook with the thunderous vibration of racing engines.

Jim held his grip and his strain against the chain. He had a glimpse of Sam, the fierman's great body ridged with muscles etched under ebony skin like steel cordage. Then, when it seemed he could no longer hold, Jim dimly heard Cap shouting again.

"The Bluffs! The Bluffs, by hell! But we can't dock her. We'll have to go by and come back with the current!"

Jim had thought of this. The minute the engines were shut down, the already strained boilers would explode. And no matter how carefully they worked the heavy chains, they couldn't duplicate the delicate business of bringing three hundred feet of ship alongside a wharf. If the *Pacific* slackened her headlong rush, the men on the forward part of her could jump overboard and escape.

There was only one thing to do. He surged fiercely against his chain. Across the room, Sam felt that pull and fought it.

"Don' do that!" he howled. "Don' run us in! You'll take her bottom out and us'll be mashed down here!"

Jim swore savagely. Bracing his feet, he put every ounce of his body into play. What if they were smashed? There were only five of them in this firehole. Ashore were a hundred of soldiers—soldiers without weapons or ammunition, and facing an enemy. What did five men of the river add up to? What did the beautiful *Pacific* and her peerless engines amount to, when their destruction would arm the men who fought?

Through the haze he could see the other chain dragging Sam helplessly across the floor as he took in link after link on his own side. Slowly the *Pacific* came around, angling across the current at rushing speed toward the shelving, muddy river-bank which lay below the wharf at the Bluffs. Cap Willets pulled his head out of his porthole and nodded.

They were dead on. Jim dropped his chain and stood weaving on wide-planted legs, waiting for the impact of the bank. And because he was a fire-hole man with lubricating oil in his veins, his last-moment thought was that perhaps, out of the wreckage, the engines of the *Pacific* could be salvaged. . . .

* * *

AMONG the hundreds of reports which reached Washington during the Indian Wars, was one which did much to increase the armament along the Missouri River during those troubled years. It was from a cavalry major and detailed the manner in which the packet *Pacific* delivered a desperately needed consignment of arms to the major's command at the Bluffs.

The major wrote in awe of a river-going juggernaut which came up the Missouri, belching fire from her tall twin stacks and plowing a great furrow in the river. He told how she ran at full speed onto the flats below the Bluffs to dump Abe Handley, alias Abe Sanders, and most of the other ringleaders of the renegades stirring rebellion among the Indians into the laps of his detachment.

He wrote of a tremendous explosion and live steam in the wreckage, of salvaging the unharmed cargo but being unable to get into the crushed fire-room until the next day. And he made certain strong

recommendations regarding future Army policy on the river which were listened to in Washington.

He ended his report with a simple listing of casualties shipped down the river on a flatboat to Fort Leavenworth for medical attention. The listing included a Negro, Missoula Sam; two unnamed apprentices suffering from shock; Captain Tibbets, Master; and Jim Kenny, Engineer.

* * *

Almost three months to the day after the *Pacific* churned up the river from St. Joe, the United States Army held an impressive ritual in the enclosure at Fort Leavenworth, winding up the Post's daily review.

Both Cap Tibbets and young Chalmers, now a Captain himself, were excited. Jim Kenny felt queer without the bandages he had worn so long, and he was impatient. Now the medicos had released him, he wanted to get back to the river. He wanted to start his search for another pair of push-and-pullers he could baby and tune and slave over until they came to life. Nowhere would there be a pair like the two which lay permanently in the mud below the Bluffs. But perhaps some day another ship like the *Pacific* could be built.

There was no reason to hang around the post any longer. Two days ago Jim had stood in the compound, listening to Abe Sanders, prisoner, confess to the killing of John Payne on the streets of St. Joe. Two days ago he had seen six rifles rise, level, and fire, delivering to Abe Sanders his measurement of the justice which the Army carried steadily Westward.

But he couldn't go. Not for a few minutes. Not until this parading and saluting was done. Not until the Commandant had finished reading the paper he now bent over.

"The War Department commissions, effective this order, the Missouri Gunboat *Kansan,* a civilian ship under charter to the United States Army. For gallantry, for bravery beyond the call of duty, the War Department makes these appointments: Executive Officer, Captain William Chalmers; Master, Captain Timothy Tibbets; Engineer, James Thurlow Kenny; Fireman, Sam Jones. . . ."

The officer read on. There was mention that the *Kansan* was another lower-river packet like the *Pacific,* rebuilt and re-powered for the Army. Jim didn't hear it all. He was listening to Missoula Sam.

"Mistah Jim, I'se seed her. She down to the river, now! Lordy, that ole devil Missouri, he shorē whupped fo' certain, now. Fire-hole's lak a new gun. Lots o' 'namel, redder'n blood. An' bright-work gleamin' like silver. An' engines! Mist' Jim, them cylinders is like so. . . ."

Sam held his arms out in a circle a big dog could jump through.

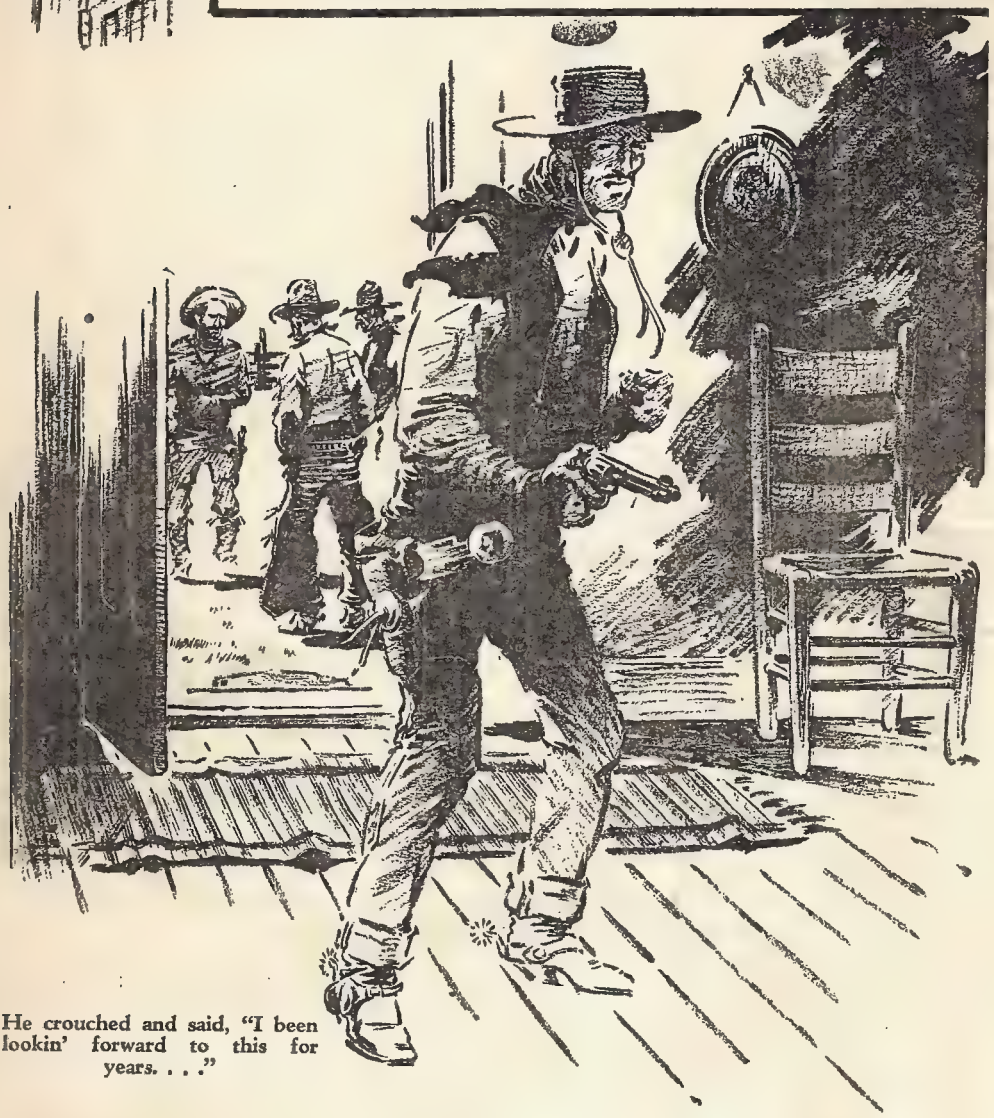
"An' a sojer tell me they's each one got the kick of a hunnerd black-skinned mules!"

Jim didn't hear any more. A hundred horsepower to each engine! Twice the old *Pacific's* boast. Red enamel and twenty-inch cylinders and nickel plated bright-work! Suddenly a new pride and eagerness began to grow in him.

He could hear again, and take pleasure in, the Commandant's words: "Engineer, James Thurlow Kenny!"

By WILLIAM R. COX

DUKE BAGLEY—



He crouched and said, "I been lookin' forward to this for years. . . ."

Young Smiley Dowd, Duke Bagley figured, was either a desperately hard-pressed young nester who had the guts to fight for his rights, or he was a double-crossing, shoot-in-the-back killer whose one aim in life was to start a war that would drench the 2 Bar O range in blood!

CHAPTER ONE

Prelude to a Range War

THE BLACK horse, seventeen hands high, and powerful as a percheron, was named Petey, which was ridiculously inadequate but pleased the rider.

He was traveling alone from Arizona, heading into Texas by way of remembered

FEUD-BREAKER

back trails. Duke Bagley spent much time conversing with Petey.

He said, "Yaas! Yaas indeed, my friend! That would be the tiny village of Hay Bend. One general store, one bar. But they would stock Bourbon whiskey, because this country, my friend, is as tough as cactus. And as spiny!"

There was a hill, and a faint trail leading down to the few scattered buildings bunched on the flats. To the west lay a ranch house. That was the 2 Bar O, owned by Chad Rankin. Northward spread the acres of the Spur, where Frank Kirby reigned jealously. And Kirby, Duke reflected, would be a fat old devil by now.

Well, the Duke had not been known as Duke Bagley in those days, twenty-five years, before the War. He had been a slim, daring youth, he assured Petey. "Handsome, too! Owned a fine herd, almost married a gal and settled down . . . Yaas, indeed!"

Petey tossed his head and rolled a dubious eye.

The Duke relaxed, and became a fattish man on a fine black horse, dressed in range clothing with bulging saddle-bags and a restless desire for the company of fellow-men and Bourbon whiskey. He drawled, "All right, maybe I did steal some of the cattle. They never proved it —in court. They may still suspect me, for men are vain of their memories, but they will not, I think, hang me on sight! We shall attempt Hay Bend. . . . Yaas indeed. I'm thirsty!"

He waited a moment, however, looking at the land of his nativity, drinking in the spaciousness of it, the grassy green of the pasturage of the two great ranches which met here. He turned and looked down the ravine. . . .

There were four horsemen, riding about a small herd of cattle. They were in quite a rush—yet this was not round-up time, nor would be for a couple of weeks. Duke fumbled in his bag and produced a fine pair of field glasses he had won from an Army officer at Prescott.

The riders were chousing the cattle along at a good rate, and one of them swerved to tail up a stray. He was a young man, slim and tall, mounted upon a dun mustang with the telltale black stripe down its back. He seemed to be grinning, urging on the long-legged, long-horned Texas steer. He reminded Duke of another lad, twenty years ago, reckless, hell-bent—and undoubtedly stealing other folks' cattle.

For the steer bore the brand of the 2 Bar O, but it was being herded, with the others, across Spur range. Duke knew that beyond the Spur, to the west, lay other, more favorable country for the sequestering of stolen beeves. There was Pride Gulch, accessible only through a pass in the Carejos Mountains, for instance.

A lone rider came into his vision then, heading up from the 2 Bar O, pausing to examine the tracks of the herd and its attendants which had gone ahead. Duke stared at the rider through his glasses. It was a girl, dressed in chaps and a blue silk blouse; a beautiful girl, and a staunch horsewoman. She was riding a Morgan, Duke thought. Fine horse—Chad Rankin's horse.

Old Chad had married Caroline, and this must be their daughter. . . . Duke grinned, looking at her. She was an armful, he decided, not one of your skinny racks of bones. . . . Her mother had been like that.

He watched while she straightened in the saddle and cantered along the back trail.

"Smart gal," Duke remarked to Petey. "Didn't want to follow and run smack dab into four rustlers. Goin' back now to bring help. Ah, well! None of our business."

He turned Petey towards town. "None of our business!" Duke repeated sharply.

He gritted his teeth, as Petey came to a dead stop. He took out three small balls, bright red in the afternoon sun, and began playing with them. In his strangely thin, immaculately kept white hands, the balls did a little dance. They flipped into the air, describing a perfect circle as he juggled them with his left hand, then with his right. He gathered them all between his fingers, and they became four red balls, then two, then one. He made a quick gesture, and the last one. They disappeared.

He could think better, playing with the red spheres. He produced them again, did his newest trick, making one into four, then back to one without an intermediate switch. It came off very well. He stuffed them back into his vest and sighed, looking to his arms.

He carried a single Colt's frontier model, beautifully oiled and polished, in his belt. Around and about his person were other weapons, including a knife of exceeding keenness, quite invisible to the beholder, and a couple of smaller surprise weapons. Yaas, he reflected, he was adequately heeled. . . .

He rode back up the hill and down on the other side, and now the big black horse became fleet as the wind.

THE LITTLE man on the porch of the 2 Bar O ranch house called, "Mary!"

The girl surrendered her Morgan to the wrangler and came slowly towards her father. He had gnarled, clever hands, and could carve rough little wooden figures, amazing caricatures of his ranch hands. He was working on a new one now.

It was a tiny replica of a tremendously fat man with a goatee and bowed legs. His nose was like a potato, his mouth a pie-like gash. Long experience in carving this cartoon in wood had made Chad Rankin highly expert.

Mary had to laugh, every time. Her father, not as tall as her ear, grinned diabolically back at her. He shifted, taking the weight off his bad hip. He hadn't been on a horse in a year, but he was a horseman and he looked it. He said, "Frank Kirby got me down, but I ain't out! This is the best one yet, ain't it, Mary?"

He held up the tiny statue. The fat figure was obscenely natural—the spittin' image of Frank Kirby, range boss. Then abruptly, the laughter died in Chad Rankin and his daughter. The little rancher took the head of the perfect wooden caricature in his strong fingers. With one twist he tore it off and threw it far from him.

The girl shook her head. "That's not right, Chad. But—they got the small herd from the north pasture this morning. I tracked 'em to the Spur boundary. . . . There were four men in the push."

Chad Rankin relaxed against the post of the verandah. His rage had died. He said resignedly, "I can't ride over there. Kirby busted my hip with his bullet. They'll clean us. And Jib Cheatham can't stop 'em."

A horse clattered into the yard as if summoned by the naming of his owner. A young man flung himself from the saddle and slid on his high heels to where the girl and her father watched him. He wore a five-pointed star upon his dark blue shirt and two guns strapped to his lean flanks.

Mary said, "Howdy, Sheriff Cheatham?"

The young officer said, "Howdy, folks? Anything new?"

A glance went between the girl and the old man. Chad Rankin drawled, "Not perticklerly new. . . . Set awhile, Jib. You still think Kirby's on the level?"

The sheriff blurted, "You all know I'm crazy about Mary. . . . But I'm a sworn officer. This is a range war between you and Kirby. . . . I ain't sayin' he's right or wrong. I just aim to enforce the law."

"We've heard all that," said Mary. "But, of course, Kirby's rustling our stock's of no interest to you, since you're just the sheriff, and neutral!"

Jib Cheatham said harshly, "That's not fair! How many head were there? Have you got a man to spare to identify the cattle? I'll go right over—"

"— and find nothin'!" cut in Chad Rankin. He got up and rested his weight on his good leg. "I'll be able to ride again, one day. Then you won't have to ride over to the Spur, Jib. I'll ride over—and that'll be the end."

The young man protested, "Now, Chad, I'm your friend. . . ."

"Sure," nodded Chad. "And I went for my gun that day, and Kirby beat me to it, usin' a swiveled holster with an open throat. We know all that. You're a fair man, Jib. The people elected you and they're gettin' a square deal." He wrinkled up his wizened little face and spat energetically. He hobbled into the house, slamming the door.

Mary Rankin said, "Chiboy, the wrangler, will ride over with you. But Chad's right. You'll never find the cattle. Kirby's too smart for any of us. I'm not blaming you, Jib. Kirby's just too slick. He'll own the entire range in the end."

"He's a better man," nodded Jib Cheatham. "He's out for all he can get. But I can't believe he's rustlin' your cattle, Mary. Kirby ain't that kind!"

Mary said dully, "You'd better get Chiboy and go. We are never going to see eye to eye, Jib. Just go!"

The sheriff found Chiboy, the old wrangler, behind the ranch house. They rode, without words, toward the Spur. . . .

CHIBOY turned at last for home, his expression blank. Sheriff Cheatham went on. After awhile he came to the spreading buildings of the

Spur, mostly built in this past year of Chad Rankin's inactivity, when Frank Kirby had prospered amazingly. There had been no sign of 2 Bar O cattle on the Spur. . . .

Kirby sat in his office, in a special chair which he had caused to be built from sturdy buttonwood and rawhide lashings, an oversized seat, ample for his bulk. He had not ridden in a year, since the day he shot Chad Rankin over a card game which had led to the fence dispute.

He had never strung the fence. But he had made himself the wealthiest man in the country without venturing from the site of his growing buildings. He stared at Cheatham now and snapped, "Rankin's thieves stole fifty of my cattle last week! When you goin' to do somethin' about it?"

The young sheriff said stiffly, "Chad Rankin never stole a steer in his life. Furthermore, he claims you are running off his beeves. Why don't you realize that someone else is rustlin' from both of you?"

"Cause it ain't so!" said Kirby, his goat's beard waggling with rage. "Chad Rankin swore he'd get me, and he's tryin' it, every way. But I'll beat him! Right from here, without stirrin', I'll lick him for the last time!"

Jib said, "You're fosterin' range war, both of you. You're goin' to cause a rumpus that'll ruin you and the country." He was a deadly serious young man. "My job is to prevent you both from doin' this! I followed a herd of Rankin's beef onto Spur land. I tracked it to the Carejos Pass, and lost it on the shale. I'm goin' to need a posse to go in after it, and I want men from the Spur and from 2 Bar O to do the job!"

"Never!" roared Kirby. "My men'll shoot on sight if a 2 Bar O waddie sets foot on my land!"

Jib sighed. The rest of the country was keeping a hands-off pledge, letting the two big ranchers fight it out. Not a man in the sheriff's jurisdiction would serve on a posse to go after rustlers in the Spur-2 Bar O country. They were vastly content to let the two big enemies fight it out, hoping for extinction of both, so that they could cut up the rich range among them.

All of which left Jib Cheatham right in the middle.

Frank Kirby's baleful eye fixed him. The fat man snapped, "You're crazy after that Mary Rankin. Allways you're on their side. I ain't trustin' you too far, Jib." He stopped dead, his eyes almost disappearing in the folds of flesh which mantled his face. He said, "I s'spose you saw Chad. I bet he can walk as good as anyone, if he tried."

"He's bad crippled," said Jib shortly, a fairly defiant tone in his voice.

"Settin' there carvin' them figures," Kirby roared suddenly. "Makin' sport of me! I know! I hear about it! Makin' fun of a man can't help gettin' fat in his old age! I'll learn him! I'll beat him, if I can't set a horse!"

Jib turned his horse's head for Hay Bend and comparative peace. It was up to him, single handed to allay this feud, to ascertain who was stealing cattle from both the Spur and the 2 Bar O, to bring the guilty parties to justice. He was going to be forced into a fight with a gang of back-shooting rustlers—and without the help to which he was entitled under the law.

Kirby sat on the chair, his fat frame quivering. If he could only find a horse to carry him! Then he'd ride over, give Chad Rankin a square chance, and this time he wouldn't miss. If he had only swivelled six inches farther that last time, he could have nailed Rankin dead center, and that would have been the end.

CHAPTER TWO

"When the Deck's Stacked Double!"

PETEY was shod, but he was skeery of the shale. He picked his way with great care. Duke kept his eyes wide open, trying to remember the way. Twenty-five years is a long time—but on the other hand, it had been precarious enough in those days, running cattle into Pride Gulch without the knowledge of the owners of said cattle. These new thieves, Duke chuckled, were merely repeating, all unaware, an old pattern.

There was a road which went up, around, and through Carejo Pass. Once inside the ravine, there was no way out

except the narrow fissure leading west, which then turned north to the open prairie.

Duke took the bottle of Bourbon out of his bag and looked at it. "Empty," he mourned. "Can't spend much time hereabouts." He put the bottle back—even without the life-giving fluid, it was company for him. Then his horse hit firmer ground and they came to the Pass.

Of course the rustlers would have a sentry. . . . Duke folded his hands on the horn of his saddle and strove to look like an innocent wanderer, lost in the wilds.

A rider came out at breakneck speed, astride a cowpony. He was a brown-skinned, brown-eyed, smooth-faced young man, and his eyes were merry, surveying the pompous outlines and rolling, watery eyes of the Duke. He pulled to a sliding halt and said, "Town's back thataway, stranger. You're ridin' into a dead end."

"Waal, waal!" said the Duke, beaming. "Got turned around, did I? Yaas, yaas! Happens t'me quite often."

The young man said, "There's nothin' ahead but a ravine without a hole on the other end. . . ." he smiled and added. "Leastways, so's you can notice!"

The Duke said, "No place for a thirsty man! Just lookin' around, sonny. . . . Name of Bagley—Duke Bagley. Thought I saw some people headin' this way—couple of men on horses. One wore a star on his chest. . . . Big fella." The Duke's eyes were suddenly not vague, but were boring into the young man.

The mirth left the smooth face. "I'd advise you to skip that. It don't signify."

"No offense," said Duke quietly. He produced the three red balls, made them four, then one. It worked smoothly again, and he was happy with himself. "Got a bit of larceny in my heart, too, sonny. Just givin' you a friendly tip. I'm heeled, and I'm stayin' at Hay Bend for awhile, mebbe. Drop in and cut a card with the old Duke."

He nudged Petey with his knee and the black horse wheeled about. Duke sat solid in the hull, stuffing the red balls away, gathering the reins in his hand. The young man called, "Thanks, Duke. . . . I'm Smiley Dowd. I'll be seein' you in Hay Bend."

Duke had a clear view of the three others who flanked him, then, as they came riding out. They were not happy, smooth characters like the young fellow. They were villainous appearing men, armed to the teeth, lowering of visage.

The Duke ignored them, cutting for Hay Bend. He had wasted the best part of a day, roaming in this remembered territory, and he had still not figured a way to gain profit for himself—not so much monetary gain, but kudos for his battered soul.

The Duke was a strange man. When he had money, he was reckless with it, seeking only to observe his fellowmen—and blithely to interfere with their lives.

He saw himself as an arbiter of fate, a sort of umpire of human behavior. There were too many moralists in the world, the Duke thought. The Devil had not enough advocates. For the Duke was openly upon the side of the minority party—when he was in funds.

When he was without gold, he was *secretly* on the side of the horned gentleman who was his patron saint. . . .

In Hay Bend, the Duke put Petey up in a stall in the palatial barn of the Mason Hotel, the roof of which leaked like a sieve. Then the Duke went into the dining room and ordered eggs.

There was good ham, and fresh eggs, at that, and Rowdy Mason, the proprietor, was a cross-eyed man of great garrulity. In ten minutes the Duke had learned all about the range war and how people were betting on the outsome and eagerly awaiting the clash which would eliminate both contestants.

" 'Cause neither of 'em can ride, y'see," concluded Rowdy. "So, when the big war comes, they're bound to both git kilt. That'll be duck soup for the little ranchers."

Duke said, "Lovely prospect, yaas, yaas! Toss you double or nothing for the meal?"

"Done!" said Rowdy spiritedly.

"Call it!" said the Duke, balancing a gold piece on his thumb. "Heads!" said Rowdy, and the Duke had to make a pass with the coin, pretending to drop it clumsily, because the coin he had chosen possessed two heads.

He found the proper one, and of course it came tails, because this one did not have any head at all, but the Duke felt no sense of achievement, as he had been psychologically wrong in the beginning. It had seemed to him that Rowdy was the kind of man who would cry "Tails!"

The Duke went down to Hay Bend's single bar, the Oasis, and felt dispirited.

A man with a peg-leg served him a bottle of Bourbon and a shot glass. Duke rolled his eyes and said:

"Eye-cups are not for public use, sir! A tumbler!"

Peg-Leg said, "One of them smart fellers, huh?" He produced a tall, thick tumbler.

The Duke filled it half to the brim. He nodded at the glum young man with the sheriff's star upon his chest, glowered at Peg-Leg, and drained the whiskey, swallowing as though it were water, enjoying every drop. Peg-Leg waited with bated breath, but the Duke did not fall prone under the dose of outrageously strong potation.

He merely poured another whopper, and said, "Toss you double or nothing for the bottle?" poising his coin suggestively.

Peg-Leg said swiftly, "Let 'er go! Tails!"

The Duke's smile was benign. He tossed. It was heads. The law of average was with him, after all! He had selected the proper coin for Peg-Leg.

He carried the bottle over and sat beside Jib Cheatham. He introduced himself and said, "Lookin' around for an opportunity to settle. Yaas, indeed! Thought you might show me the country, Sheriff! You must know everyone around!"

Jib said gloomily, "Yep. Glad to, some day."

Duke said, "Got a little money, y'see. Thought I might buy a ranch. He shuddered inwardly at the idea, but he had to get out and mosey among the people, because he had been thinking about a certain fact since the wordy Mason had told him the story of the range war.

There was no one in the county who would remember him, the Duke was sure. Certainly Chad Rankin wouldn't, nor Frank Kirby. From Mason's description, he wouldn't recognize them, either. He remembered Rankin as wiry and active and youthful—Kirby as the strong man of the land, handsome and really rather lean, for his height. They had been friendly rivals, then, for Caroline Wiles, the mother of Mary Rankin.

It was the old story, of course. Rankin had won the girl, Kirby had prospered a bit more in wordly goods. . . . But Kirby had gone to St. Joe for a long visit, and Duke had evaded him there, but had watched him with Rose Carrigan, the Songbird of the South. Yes, Duke would have to see Kirby, as soon as possible.

THE door of the Oasis banged and Smiley Dowd came in, lithe as a young panther. His eyes flickered over Duke and the sheriff, and he murmured, "Howdy, Jib!" and went to the bar for his poison.

The three others who came behind him seemed to form a rear guard. Their names were Mosey Gary, Tom Eagle, and Brady. They all looked a deal alike, and they were all tough hombres, Duke reaffirmed.

The sheriff stiffened in his chair, but his voice was calm. He said, "That's one of the small outfits to the north of Spur. Smiley's got a nice little herd. Those are his riders. Smiley's growin', I hear."

Smiley wheeled and came to the table. His grin had not changed, it was all-embracing. He said, "You shouldn't talk so loud, Jib. I heard you plain. I'm growin', all right. But what's the use of criticizin' me?"

Jib said, "Stay away from 2 Bar O, Smiley." He did not elaborate, did not take any cognizance of the Duke's presence. It was the buzz of a rattlesnake's tail; an honest and forthright warning.

Smiley beamed and said, "I'm makin' progress when you get scared that away! Thanks for tippin' me off! Have a drink, you-all."

The Duke poured his own from the bottle. Jib shook his head, refusing.

Smiley said, "Looks like everyone's mad at everybody else. 'Ceptin' me!" He winked at Duke and went out into the

street. It was Saturday night, Duke realized, and the people were coming into Hay Bend.

Jib growled suddenly, as if it were forced from him, "The toughest small outfit in Texas! Damn Smiley Dowd!"

Duke pretended not to hear. The three Dowd men were turning from the bar, bearing bottles and glasses, leering about, looking for action.

They arranged themselves about a round table and Moe Gary, who seemed to be the leader, called, "Get out them cyards and let's have action. Stranger, are you a gambler?"

Duke said, "Well, my little chickadees, I wouldn't call myself one. No. No, indeed! But if you insist. . . ."

He waddled more than was necessary, going to their table, ignoring Jib's low-voiced warning. He sat down and fumbled with the deck which Peg-Leg brought over.

Rowdy Mason came in and joined them. Then Peg-Leg himself got a man to tend bar and took a hand. Jib Cheatham remained alone, brooding over an empty shot glass.

The Dowd men were noisy, profane. They bet on anything, raised on nothing, bluffed and stampeded every hand. Rowdy and Peg-Leg were cautious, and lost rapidly. Duke held his own for awhile, getting the lay of the game.

A nice pot came up, and Gary was boosting every time around. Duke was dealing. He held the deck, making a mental review of every card held by the men in the game.

He had placed them neatly, he hoped. Gary should have three aces. The betting ended with Gary on top. The Duke said, "Cards, if any, my fine, wholesome, little friends!"

Gary said, "Two!"

The Duke dealt around. He had a small flush himself, which he filled with a king extracted from the bottom. He knew there was a straight and two high pair out, and three tens. Everyone was in. Gary couldn't wait to bet. He reached out an arm, dropping chips so that they rattled on the table.

Duke made a grab, caught Gary's wrist. He gave a quick twist. The ace of spades seemed to drop among the chips. Duke's voice was hard, "All right, show your hand, Gary!"

Peg-Leg emitted a squawk and turned over the struggling man's cards. There were three aces and a couple of strays. Duke said, "Cheating, eh, my fine-feathered friend?"

He released Gary suddenly, flinging him back in his chair. The Dowd foreman gurgled, furious beyond speech. Before anyone else could move, Duke's Colt was eying them coldly across the table.

Duke said, "I'm not a fighter, fortunately for you loud-mouthed, whiskey-guzzling, imitation tough hands. I'm lettin' you go. I'm lettin' you run to Smiley Dowd with your troubles—and then you can tell him maybe it's his turn to be mad at somebody! Now git! All three of you!"

Gary recovered himself. He kept his hands raised, and his wolf eyes never left Duke's face. He slowly backed out, past the still silent sheriff. Tom Eagle, the halfbreed, also glowered, and Brady followed. They went through the doors and the Duke pushed the chips around, dividing them in three equal parts before the staring Peg-Leg, Rowdy and himself.

He said, "Toss you gents for the stacks?"

They chorused explosively, "No!" and Peg-Leg cashed the chips. Duke returned to a seat at the sheriff's table.

Jib Cheatham said solemnly, "You have just put yourself in the middle of a beautiful tight, unless you get out of this country fast."

Duke said, "Yaas. Yaas, indeed. Perhaps you had better make me a deputy. I've never been a deputy—and you can't hire one for love nor money, my little sheriff!"

Jib's chin jerked up, he surveyed Duke carefully, from head to foot. He was no fool, this solemn young lawman. The doors swung and Smiley Dowd came in, quick, like an avenging God. His hand flicked towards his gun.

Duke's back was to the door, but no one saw the motion of his draw. He was suddenly just sitting at the table, half swung about, with the Colts aiming at Smiley's middle.

He did not shoot, he just said, "Enough you fool!"

His voice stopped Smiley's gun halfway out of the holster. There was no grin upon young Dowd's face. He was staring at death and he recognized it. He shoved his weapon back into leather and stepped close, bending over the table.

He said in a low voice, "I don't know your game, Duke Bagley, or whatever you call yourself. But Moe Gary never had sense enough to stack a card in his sleeve. You can't run a thing like that on my men!"

Duke replaced his gun in his belt. He said, "Why don't you run along, young Dowd? You have a kind face, which does not go with the kind of game *you* are playing. Just run along, sonny. Old Duke let you live this time. Yaas! Yaas, indeed. Next time . . . may be different!"

Smiley stood for a long moment. Then he turned and banged through the door.

Jib Cheatham said, "I don't know what your idea is, either. But I've got a badge for you in my offiee!"

CHAPTER THREE

A Quick Game for the Duke!

THE big, imposing figure of the Duke marched beside the trim, handsome young peace officer, threading through the crowds of small farmers and cattle people, the wavering cowboys on their Saturday spree, sunbonneted women with market baskets.

The Duke rumbled, "There are certain imponderabilities, my boy, fundamental. . . ." He paused to admire his own rolling polysyllables, only vaguely aware of their meaning. "Like this feller Smiley. I taunted him. He smiled, in character. But he was not amused. Beneath his smooth exterior lurks a great hatred. For whom?"

"Me," said Jib promptly. "He's been seein' Mary Rankin, and I don't like it. Smiley's rustlin' cattle from both 2 Bar O and the Spur, only I can't prove it."

"Who else?" demanded Duke, and Jib was silent. Duke went on, "I doubt, my fine young sheriff, that you are more than a mere rival in a game of love. . . . Yes—a paltry thing, despite your doubts, when a man really hates. Who else does Smiley Dowd hate?"

"Why—no one. He likes everybody. He's plumb popular in Hay Bend," said Jib ruefully. "Women, kids, everyone likes Smiley. He come out here last year, ridin' a center-fire saddle with a high horn and claimin' he came from the East, and you know that's a Californy rig. Had a little money and bought Jones's place, up northwest of the Spur. Like I say, he's growed plenty in a year. And he brought Gary and Eagle and Brady in, and nobody cares about makin' any neighborly calls on him."

"Seems a likely lad," nodded the Duke. "Guess Mary doesn't exactly hate him, eh?"

He pointed carelessly. On the porch of the general store, Smiley Dowd held a big armful of bundles while Mary Rankin laughingly climbed into a buckboard behind a pair of Morgans. While they watched, the young rancher handed up the packages one by one to be stowed away, keeping up a running fire of conversation which seemed to amuse Mary greatly until she looked across the street and spied Jib Cheatham.

After that she didn't laugh so much, but her pink cheeks were averted from Jib and her attention was apparently only for Smiley. Jib roughly pushed Duke aside and went into his office, which was an unsued store on Main Street.

Duke followed, looking at the tin safe, the roll-top desk, the array of rusty handcuffs, keys and parts of guns taken from varied criminals. In the rear was a log building which held three large cells, well barred, but empty.

He said, "Nice layout for a little old town, yaas, indeed! Always wanted to be a lawman." He pinned the small star carefully to his black shirt, swelled his chest.

Jib said, "Raise your right hand." Before he knew it, Duke was taking an oath.

The man who gave it to him was not joking, and something inside the Duke did a panicky little flop. All of a sudden he realized that he was into more than he bargained for, that he had blithely laid himself among the sheep instead of the wolves.

It was a strange and somewhat terrifying moment, but the Duke was equal to it. He sort of mumbled his responses, and

within he made mental reservations. He was a great one for those little secret ideas which he reserved for his private thoughts. They had helped him over many a rough spot in life, when he had been forced to relieve someone of something which the Duke needed worse than its owner. . . .

It was over, and he sighed gustily. "Makes a man dry, this police work! Yaas, indeed. Must get back to the Oasis and replenish the reservoir. You may forget about that local hot spot for tonight, Sheriff. Your trusty deputy will watch over it. . . ."

Jib said shortly, "Put the drunks in the cells. I'm goin' to circulate and keep an eye on Smiley's boys. Tomorrow we'll go out and take a look at Smiley's ranch."

Duke said, "As you say, my splendiferous superior officer! I'm at your command! Yaas, indeed!"

He rolled out, preening himself. He met various people, to whom Jib introduced "my new deputy from Arizona." He saw the quick question in many eyes, and learned that Jib had a real poker face. People greeted him cautiously, obviously reserving opinion. Which suited Duke fine.

Jib left him suddenly, making a beeline across the street. Gary and the other two men had distracted Smiley, and Mary was momentarily alone, sitting in the buckboard.

Jib swept off his hat and began talking. Mary evidently didn't respond too well, but the sheriff stuck to it, and when Smiley turned back, it was a threesome. Duke watched from in front of the Oasis, never missing a detail.

Inside, a piano tinkled, and a cracked tenor voice sang Seeing Nelly Home. Duke's agile mind leaped back twenty-odd years, and again he could see and hear the Songbird of the South, Rose Carrigan. That song had been her favorite.

Duke watched the three youngsters and almost he sighed for his own lost youth in St. Joe and points north and south upon the River—but those were vain regrets. And anyway, in those days he hadn't known a thimble-rig from a mousetrap holdout, and for the most part had been poor as a church mouse.

He went inside the Oasis and Peg-Leg refused to match for a bottle of Bourbon, so he had to pay for it. But he was thinking, very deeply, about what he had learned in such an amazingly short time since his advent into this country, and he was scarcely annoyed at parting with cold cash, only making a mental note to get back at Peg-Leg later.

Chiboy, the old wrangler from the 2 Bar O, came in with a couple of hands from Rankin's ranch and drank at one end of the bar. Four or five lean, leathery characters stayed at the other end, and they were obviously Kirby's Spur riders. In between, the merriment of small fry went on while Duke watched.

Hay Bend wasn't a trail town, nor a boom town. It was just a center for that part of the cow-country and there were no tinhorns nor big-money chasers. The fun seemed innocent enough, except that the 2 Bar O and Spur men kept wary eyes on each other over the heads of the others.

Near midnight Jib came in and sat with Duke. They were silent, awaiting the inevitable Saturday night drunk who would start a brawl because his wolf was straining at the leash. There was no sign of Smiley Dowd nor his men in the Oasis that night.

The piano went on, and Duke wondered about Smiley Dowd, absent from gaiety on a Saturday night. What urgent business could have taken the smiling boy from town? He reached in his buckskin vest for the comforting magic red balls,

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his eye caught the unexpected sheen of his deputy's star. He frowned, pursing his lips.

A horse rattled through town and stopped outside and a cowhand came in, walking stiff-legged straight past the Spur outfit and up to Chiboy.

He said loudly, "Chad Rankin's been bad shot. The Doc's on the way out, but Miss Mary's scared."

He turned to Jib, his voice hard. "You better git out there too, Sheriff! There's gonna be hell blazin' on this range!"

CHIBOY came forward, a lean old man, teeth gleaming. He deliberately counted the Spur men, ticking them off on his fingers. He grunted, "There's others of 'em—and mebbe their fat damn' boss can ride, too, if he has to!"

The Spur men jerked around, feeling for their gun-butts. Jib came to his feet, pale-faced. Duke went forward, moving away from the table and between the two factions with amazing celerity. He said, soft-voiced, "Head for home, all of you. Stay put, and don't draw cards until you know your hands!"

Chiboy growled, "Outa the way, Fatty!"

Duke's hands whirled in a negligent gesture, and his Colt appeared in his right hand. In his left was a snub-nosed, deadly bulldog revolver.

He said, "I'm not fooling, gents! Vamose!"

Slowly they gave way, eyeing Jib askance, knowing the Sheriff would come in if they started anything. They mounted, first the 2 Bar O men, then those from Spur, and the night was loud with the sound of their horses.

As Jib was hurrying to the corral for his horse, Duke took occasion to purloin a bottle of Bourbon while Peg-Leg was jabbering with the excited citizenry, and strolled along in Jib's wake. It would be better to take his own time about it, he thought. Jib would only be hollering for Smiley Dowd's blood, which Duke thought, was ridiculous.

The Doc was out ahead, and Mary Rankin was with her father, therefore Duke had time. He saw Jib tear out of town on a fine roan, and had the sleepy hostler throw the hull on Petey.

Soon they were going easily along the trail behind the sheriff, but when they came to the turning off place, the Duke persuaded Petey to go right, instead of left. He came to a fence, and in the moonlight he could see a large corral, several fine, adobe buildings, at the moment lighted and filled with voices. This was the Spur, owned by Frank Kirby.

Not caring to attract attention, the Duke dismounted to drop the bars of the gate. He led Petey inside, dropped the reins and bent to replace the rail. His hand struck something, which he grasped and lifted.

It was a small wooden object. He saw that it was a carving, a grotesque little manniken. He examined it as best he could in the half-light, then carefully placed it in his saddlebag. He went forward a few paces and stood, measuring the distance from gate to verandah.

Then he tied Petey to the rail and walked up on the porch of the Spur and called, "Hello, in there! I want to see Frank Kirby!"

Silence fell like a blanket within. Then the door was flung wide and two of the Spur hands who had been in the Oasis had Duke covered. He showed his empty palms and said,

"Just a confab. Yaas, yaas, indeed! Just want to see if this ain't my old friend from St. Joe, Big Kirby!"

An irascible voice said, "Let him in!"

Duke walked across the threshhold, keeping his hands in plain sight and quite still. The two other Spur cowboys also held naked guns. In the commodious chair, Frank Kirby peered through his curtain of fat and said, "I never saw you in my life!"

Duke stared fascinatedly at the behemoth of a man. He said, "Waal, waal! Big Kirby, twenty-five years later! Mean to say you don't remember St. Joe and the Songbird of the South?"

Kirby said hoarsely, "What do you know about Rose Carrigan? Get out of here, Casey—all you men. Get out! I want to talk to this man!"

"Yaas, sir!" murmured Duke. "Time does fly! Remember Darling Nelly

Grey, in the Brau House, and how she used to hold that high note on the last chorus? Those were the days, Big Kirby, you sly old fat puss!"

The men retreated, wondering. Kirby growled, "Don't twit me on my size, stranger! I see you're wearin' a star. What do you want here, and why bring up St. Joe?"

Duke swung his bulk against a desk, sitting on one leg. He said, "Why you holding that gun on me, Kirby? Are you scared? A big, fat old wheezing, pusillanimous scoundrel like you, who'd go off and leave as sweet a gal as ever lived to sing her pretty songs all by her lonesome . . . ?"

"She left me," said Kirby, gasping for breath with which to pour out his words. "She told me off and left me, and the War came along. . . . I couldn't find her, I tell you! I always looked, tried. . . ."

"She died in Natchez," said Duke impassively. "Yaas! Happened to be there. Knew her well. Things didn't go so good with her after you went."

"She threw me out! I—I made a mistake! I miscalled her name one night. . ."

"Caroline, was what you called her," nodded Duke. "Rose was proud. In your sleep, you called for Caroline—Caroline Rankin. Chad Rankin got shot tonight. . . ."

"Who are you?" demanded Kirby. He heaved out of his chair, and he was six feet, seven inches tall, a gross, terrible figure with an old Peacemaker clutched in his pudgy right hand, steady as a rock, aimed at Duke's ample middle.

Duke said softly, "Twenty-five years! It's a longish time, eh, Big Kirby? Remember a squirt called Happy Jack? A handsome, lean lad? He loved Caroline Wiles Rankin, too. But he never was in the race. And then later, it was Rose Carrigan, only Big Kirby came along, and Happy Jack had to duck, because of that old cattle business out here. . . ."

"You're that damned rustler! You've come back to pin Chad Rankin's shootin' on me!" said Kirby. "You'd better say your prayers, Happy Jack! I'm finishin' you right now!"

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Duke came off the desk and went around in a half-circle. He came in on the unarmed side of the big man and hit him with a lunging shoulder. The Peacemaker went off, but Duke's gun was jabbing through the layers of fat, and Duke was whispering, "Tell your men it was an accident, Big! Call them off, or I'll let your guts out on the floor!"

Kirby's voice was shouting, "Stay out of it, boys! Just an accident! Me and this deputy got business together!"

"You never spoke truer words!" said Duke with satisfaction. His eyes roved over the comfortably furnished ranch house, which bespoke plenty of money. "Yaas! Yaas, indeed, my overgrown big blubber-head!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Gold—or Blood!

JIB CHEATHAM strode into the 2 Bar O, and Mary barred his path. She said, "Doc's in there. You'll have to wait. I'll tell you what you need to know." She was calm, but her suffering was close to the surface and Jib's heart did nip-ups.

Jib said, "Is he—is he . . . ?"

"Doc can't say," Mary said. "It's through the chest, from the front." She gathered herself and went on in a monotone. "I found him when I came home. He was on the porch. He couldn't—can't talk. But there had been riders here. I got a lantern and looked. Four riders, Jib. I can't believe it, but—Smiley was here. I know the track of his dun. There's an off-size rear shoe."

Jib said, "Take it easy. I'll get him."

Mary said painfully, "I must tell you everything. Chad's gun was out, alongside him. There was a bullet fired. He got in one shot. . . . And Jib, some devil put a wiping rag alongside him, to make it look like suicide!"

Jib said through set teeth, "No jury in this county will swallow that! Chad ain't that kind!"

She swayed a little, and the young sheriff caught her by the arms and led her to a chair. He said, "I'll take your own boys. They'll go with me, and we'll head up into Carejos Pass and bring Smiley in for questioning. If he resists, I'll shoot hell out of him! I promise you, Mary, I'll bring him in, and I'll find the cattle, too. He's been rustlin' from you both. . . . I know he's an attractive feller, Mary. Why—I could like Smiley myself. But he's got a bad crew around him, and he's gone as wrong as they are. I—I'm sorry, Mary."

"I'm afraid you're right," she said weakly. "He's—he's such a nice lad! But I couldn't be mistaken on that track. I *know* it! We even talked about the dun, and what a sturdy little beast he was, and about his large hoof. . . ."

Jib said, "Take care of Chad. Maybe . . . Doc can pull him through. Chad's tough." He hurried out back and called for Chiboy.

The lean wrangler gathered his men together. There were five of them who could go along. They saddled up silently, each making sure of his gun. There would be no surrender at Smiley's place, they knew. Gary and the others would fight until the end.

Jib took time to wonder about his new deputy. The stout man with his quick mind and quicker hands would be good to have along in this fracas. Jib could not imagine where Duke had gone, unless he thought things too hot and rode quietly away.

Jib swung onto the roan, then they rode out towards Carejos Pass as the moon waned. . . .

THE Duke rode alone from the Spur long before Jib Cheatham got under way with the avenging 2 Bar O men. He went straight and swiftly for the Pass, and Petey, disgruntled, took it out in hurrying to get the whole thing over with.

There were no guards, this time, and the Duke got in. He made the remembered turning by moonlight and came into the hidden ravine which he had once used himself.

There was a considerable herd grazing in there which he did not essay to count. All of Smiley's men must be at the ranch, Duke thought.

That would presage something of importance to the outfit. Duke came past a creek and was abruptly upon the scant

buildings of Smiley's small spread. Again there were lights and the sound of men's voices.

He heard Gary say loudly, "It was a damn' fool play! You got no right stickin' us into anything like this! I saw Rankin go down, and I tell ya Cheatham'll be out here before morning! If we work fast, we kin get the herd out and break it up and mebbe make the Trail. My friend Oley Anders is comin' up with a herd, and he ain't one to answer questions from no nosey sheriff. It's a long chance, but I'm for takin' it!"

Eagle and Brady chimed agreement, and there was another rider in there, Duke saw through the open window. That made five men to run a two-man outfit —and that looked bad for Smiley Dowd. Cheatham would certainly love to take charge here. . . .

Smiley said, "No!"

"Yes!" said Gary, and there was danger in his voice. "You insisted we go to the 2 Bar O. We coulda been in town, establishin' alibis, but no! You gotta ride for a grandstand play. This is your tight, and we're not stayin' with you!"

Smiley said, "Get out, then. But don't touch the cattle in the arroyo! I'm telling you!"

"You're tellin' us," said Gary. "But you ain't makin' it stick! Now we're takin' over!"

Guns snicked loose, and Smiley was in the middle. Duke held his breath, watching and ready. If they attempted to kill the young cowman then and there, little could be done about it by one man on the outside of the building. Duke's two guns centered where they would do the most good.

There were a couple of things he might try, but both were very dangerous. He knew all about men like Moe Gary, hard-bitten, fearless, dangerous as blacksnakes. To walk in on such men whose weapons were bared invited death for Smiley, at least.

There was something else. . . . Duke shifted and lined up on the single lamp which illuminated the room. . . .

At that moment he heard the hoofs of many horses coming through the pass.

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Cheatham was riding then in search of Smiley. They would come down through the trees, surround the house and start plucking at it with their rifles. War was looming. . . .

Duke hesitated no longer. He fired his Colt at the lamp. It was a fine shot.

He ran through the door into the darkness. Gary was cursing, but no man fired a shot, for fear a hitting a friend.

Duke shouted, "The sheriff, you fools! Comin' through the Pass! Get down and grab your rifles—you're in for it!"

Smiley exclaimed, "Don't fight him! This can be—"

Duke located the young man by his voice. Duke jerked Smiley with him out the door. In Smiley's ear, Duke growled, "Get that dun mustang and ride out the back way, you young fool! Gary'll kill you for nothin'! Leave him and the sheriff to fight it out! Ride!"

They were in the open and Cary was ordering his men to their rifles. Smiley said, "What kind of a—"

Duke broke in: "Get that pony and meet me up on Spur! I tell you, I know the whole story. I knew Big Kirby in St. Joe!"

"You—*what?*"

"Get goin'!" repeated the Duke, shoving the youth.

Jib Cheatham's voice rang out, "You in there! Smiley! Surrender! I want you!"

"On Spur, behind the ranch houses!" Duke whispered. "I'll cover you! Ride, you nincompoop!"

He mounted Petey in one leap and started riding towards the sheriff. He called, "It's me! Don't shoot, my fine young peace officer!"

A bullet whined from the house, cutting over Duke's shoulder. He ducked low in the saddle and rode feverishly, cursing the timing which had gone wrong. Jib Cheatham was too prompt. Another leaden bee buzzed along behind him. He had almost reached the shelter of the woods when it caught up with his flight.

It was like being hit on the head with a hammer. He went elbow over tincan off of Petey, who stopped wonderingly, just at the edge of the trees. He fell into a thicket, and his weight carried him through and deposited him under a tall pine. He lay there, without sound or motion, dead to the world. . . .

The dun was saddled and waiting, for Smiley Dowd had not thought the night's work done. He vaulted aboard and cut over the back lot to the pasture. He made it across the top of the mountain, along a percipitous ledge, then descending to the river. He swam over, holding to the tail of the dun, cut through a ravine and came out ten miles above the Spur buildings with the sun mounting steadily.

Smiley was in no hurry to meet the strange, stout deputy sheriff. He wanted time to think about this new development. He knew his horse's tracks would lead the way to his door when Chad Rankin was found. He had expected to give himself up. . . .

Gary and the others were not just wild boys out for wages and a good time—that was what hurt. He had thought he could trust the rough boys from the Border gang. He knew they had committed crimes in the past, but he had made them a generous offer to ride for him on his small spread in the Hay Bend country, and he had believed that they were ready to settle down.

But tonight Gary had shown him there was no change. The Border boys were still all for driving 2 Bar O and Spur cattle out to the Trail and heading for Abilene. . . .

He was alone, then, with his hatred. He holed up in the deep grass of Kirby's north pasture, beneath a spreading tree, where a tiny stream ran chortling from the mountains to the prairie. He had no food, but he could smoke, and think, and wait for that mysterious character, Duke Bagley—who had known Kirby back in St. Joe.

The hours passed, and Duke did not appear. The hatred began to jell, then to heat, then to burst into small flames. In awhile it would be a consuming conflagration, and there was very little left of Smiley Dowd except the burning. . . .

THE 2 Bar O men were getting it hot and heavy. Smiley Dowd's cabin was strategically placed so that the woods were at long range, and its back was protected by cleared acreage to

the second range of the Carejos. Twice Jib tried to throw his men in a circle, and twice accurate rifle fire from Gary and his men drove them back.

Jib had not seen Smiley go, because the Duke's dramatic ride for safety had interfered. Chiboy was rinsing the Duke's pale face with spring water, bandaging the wound in his head.

The bullet had creased along the thick part of the skull, and it was to be presumed that the Duke would recover consciousness sometime after the sun rose. At least, that was Chiboy's opinion, and the lean wrangler had been in many a battle and nursed many a wound.

Chiboy went on to say, "Course, I ain't no doc, but seems to me like Chad's not got his'n, either. It was high, near the shoulder. Mebbe we're riskin' a lotta lead and lives to take this mob, Sheriff. Mebbe we oughta leave a guard here and have someone go back and see how bad Chad's hurt."

Bullets were pounding into Smiley's cabin. From the windows came a deadly, unceasing fire, one rifle at a time, which clipped leaves and twigs uncomfortably close to the posse's ears, although as yet no one was hit. But Jib stubbornly shook his head.

"I'm takin' Smiley in. There's more than Chad's shootin' in this."

Chiboy said practically, "Mebbe you're takin' him in, Sheriff, but my boys are gettin' sick of it. Gary and them others ain't like Smiley. They're gun-slingers from away back, and my boys are just cow-hands."

Duke groaned and opened his eyes. The sun was getting higher. He blinked and sat up. Chiboy had staunched the flow of blood and arranged a rude bandage from a torn undershirt.

He said, "Ugh! Fine thing! Spend my whole life keepin' out of range of guns—and have to catch one on Carejo!"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," said Jib Cheatham. "I'm goin' in there and get Smiley Dowd!"

Duke put out a hand to steady himself. He said in feigned amazement, "You think Smiley's in there? Why, I already been in there, haven't I? Would I come out without Smiley?"

Jib's jaws slacked off about a foot. "He got away? You mean he quit on his men?"

"He ain't there!" said Duke. "You're tradin' shots with Gary, Eagle, Brady and another louse. You can keep right on if you want. Me, I'm headin' out after Smiley."

Chiboy said, "I told you, Sheriff! I'm goin' back to the ranch and see how Chad's a-comin'."

Duke drew Jib to one side. He said rapidly, "There's a heap of stolen cattle in the ravine this side of the pass. Make Chiboy lend you a couple men and drive 'em out. Gary and them might follow—then you'll have 'em in the open!"

"I want Smiley," said Jib stubbornly.

"Allowin' your prejudice to hamper you in your duties?" asked Duke sternly. "The cattle are stolen, I tell you! It's a chance to return 'em to their owners—Rankin and Kirby! Are you a peace officer or a rantin', ravin', red-eyed, double-dyed damfool?"

The Duke managed to heave himself onto Petey. His head was reeling, but he fixed Jib with his eyes and said, "You took an oath of office, didn't you? You're responsible to the people of this county, ain't you? Git down there and drive off those stolen steers, or turn in your badge and gun for Smiley Dowd like a man!"

Jib gasped, "Hey! Who's sheriff here, you or me?"

Petey chose this moment to make a little sunfish jump which caused Duke to grab leather with both hands. But the stout man pulled himself together and roared, "You're sheriff now—but perhaps I'll remain and campaign against you if you are derelict in your duty now!"

Petey bolted, then, and it seemed as if Duke was heading straight back for the 2 Bar O. Jib turned indecisively to Chiboy, and that sage veteran said, "If we duck out now, Gary will think he's got us buffaloed, and won't leave the country. I know Gary. He's like a hundred other wolves. He'll hang on our flanks with his men and mebbso we c'n pot him later."

Jib said shortly, "Get two men and go down into Pride Gulch. Run the herd out of there and cut out your cattle."

Chiboy said, "Huh? Pride Gulch?"

"Yep," said Jib impatiently. "And hurry, while I cover your retreat!"

Chiboy squinted, then shook his head. "So that's the game—stached 'em in Pride Gulch! Now, why didn't they long since run 'em out to the Trail and cash in?"

He shook his head and went for his men, ducking among the bullets the Gary crowd kept sending as warning not to come too close to Smiley Dowd's cabin. And he left Jib standing there, a baffled young officer, wondering also why Smiley Dowd hadn't sold his stolen beef.

THE Duke was wondering a little, too. He had shifted his course and was going north onto Spur land. His knowledge of Big Kirby's past in St. Joe had given him the bulge on all the others, but there were a couple of points which needed clearing up.

He was thinking now of Mary Rankin. He said to Petey, "Haven't even had a real good look at her. But she sure has the cut of Caroline Wiles Rankin, and Caroline kind of liked me, at that. But she was smart—knew the old Duke inside out. . . .

"Kirby was big, Rankin was sort of kindly. . . . Used to be good at those Morgan colts, did Rankin, and Caroline loved horseflesh. . . .

"Yaas. Yaas, indeed," mused Duke. "But Mary scanned those tracks when Smiley rustled her paw's cows—and she never peeped about 'em. And Jib says she put him onto Smiley, after Chad was shot. . . . It don't check, Petey!"

He cast about the north section, came to the little, burbling stream. He climbed stiffly down and drank. He had lost his hat and the bandage was slipping, so he rearranged it as best he could, covering the bald spot over which he so carefully combed his long hair, in order that the sun might not overcome him. He was a trifle ill, and very hungry.

"This range life!" he muttered. "Loathsome! Why did I ever come back?"

But he knew well enough why he had come back—they had run him off the River, and he had been forced to exterminate several people soon thereafter, which moved him on and on. Money had stuck to him, for a change—he felt for his belt and it was still heavy and intact.

He sighed and remounted and started downstream, thinking Smiley would have stuck to water for himself and his horse. The Duke was late, he knew. . . . The bullet had slowed him up by several hours.

He came to a place where there were markings of man and beast. Duke's eye read the message plain—Smiley had waited here, his horse had grazed. There were cigarette ends under the tree. Then the sign led south in the direction of Spur.

"Thunderation!" groaned Duke. "He's started his big whizzer! Get going, Petey! Pick up those long legs! We're going to be late for the hog-rassle!"

* * *

The stunning of Duke Bagley and his subsequent slumber under the tree at Dowd's cabin upset the entire time schedule. Chad Rankin awoke at dawn and grinned up at Mary and the Doc, and spoke a few words before he relapsed into unconsciousness. Mary turned pale as a ghost and went outdoors.

The Doc followed her and said, "You've got to rest, Mary. You're worn out!"

But she was struggling with a saddle, calling her one pet Morgan, who would stand for her without roping, and the Doc had to help her tighten the cinches. She said, "There may be a killing if I don't go!"

Doc said resignedly, "I suppose so."

"Will—will Chad get well?" She had not asked this before, not daring to risk an honest answer.

Doc said, "The next couple hours will tell, Mary."

"If—if I don't get back, explain to him," she choked.

She headed the fleet Morgan for Smiley Dowd's cabin, by-passing Pride Gulch, of course. She went very swiftly up the ravine and rode smack out onto the flat from the woods, waving her arms, crying, "Don't shoot! I've got to talk to Smiley and the Sheriff!"

So, all Gary and his men had to do was catch her as she dropped off her horse.

Then they tied her up and took her inside the cabin. They hid the Morgan over beyond the cabin, in a safe place.

Then Gary asked her a thousand questions, but Mary kicked and hollered whenever he came close enough to speak to her. This confused Gary very much. He was a tough hombre who would steal any man's shirt, and the only time he had ever been bluffed was when the Duke had flabbergasted him with that ace of spades which Gary certainly had not hidden out, much as he may have desired to do so.

He said, "You're a plumb stubborn gal, ma'am. I reckon we'll just have to kill Smiley and the sheriff both. We got a stake in this thing too, y'know. We got our time and work into it."

She said, "When they find you've tied me up and abused me, the whole county will be after you! They'll hang you!"

"Sho, ma'am, they'll hang us anyway if they catch us!" said Gary.

Eagle and Brady and the third man, whom they called Buzzard, and who looked the part, were fretful. Gary said, "Spread out and chase the posse. We got them plumb scared. Mebbe we can snake out the cattle and make the Trail while they're stumblin' around after Smiley."

They all mounted and scattered, riding down towards Pride Gulch by devious paths, scouting carefully, which took a little time. When they got there, and discovered the cattle gone, they were wild with rage.

After the cursing died down, Gary said, "Smiley! He's responsible for this dirty deal!"

"We got to get him," said Eagle.

"It's Kirby he was down on. Let's head for Spur," said Gary. "There's somethin' queer about this!"

* * *

It was not long after Gary left that Mary Rankin managed to fall from the chair, and while lying on the floor, she got her hands out of her bonds. In a moment she was free. It took her a little time to search around the cabin, then she whistled and her Morgan came, hobbled but untethered. She got aboard and started down the trail, but she did not want to go home.

She remembered her father's words, in his brief spell of consciousness. She was nearer Spur; she would go there, she decided, and settle that question, for the time being.

She wanted to see Kirby, anyway. She kept telling herself this—knowing all the time in her heart that a certain young man was more likely to be somewhere in the vicinity of the Spur. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Duke Settles the Score

BIG FRANK KIRBY sat in his chair and looked at a faded photograph.

In his lap was his old, formidable Peacemaker. Thoughts passed through the head of the fat man at a slow, torturing speed, unfolding a panorama of past life which he cared not to remember, but which pressed upon him.

When the door was darkened by the slim young man in the checkered shirt, he moved his eyes without shifting position. He said, "That you, Dowd? What you want here?"

Smiley stepped in. There were Spur men about, but although they were suspicious of him, they had no reason for making a hostile move unless Kirby gave the word.

Smiley knew his chances of getting away were nil, but he was past all that. He stood spraddlelegged and the hatred fanned out of his eyes and sprayed Big Kirby. He said, "That's a pretty picture you got in your hand."

He reached inside his shirt and produced an oilskin-wrapped packet. He took out a piece of pasteboard and laid it on the desk. He said, "Go ahead. Look at it!"

Kirby's eyes slanted down, but the gun did not waver. He stared at the pasteboard. He drew a deep breath and said, "Yeah. I see. Where in hell did you get it?"

"Where do you think?" demanded Smiley. "Take a good look at me."

The sunlight fell across the face which usually smiled, but was not grave and hard and a bit distorted by hatred in Smiley Dowd. Kirby looked hard and long. Then he put the gun on the desk alongside the two pictures. He said,

"All right. What do you want?"

"To kill you," said Smiley quietly.

Kirby nodded. For a moment his gaze went outdoors, where the Spur men lounged, expecting anything now that the ball had opened with Chad Rankin's wounding. Then he shrugged his enormous shoulders and said, "That would be foolish. The boys would kill you, too."

"Do you think I care about that?" said Smiley. "Do you think I haven't got that figured out? I don't want to die. I'm too young." His smile returned for a moment, but it was desperate. "But my game went wrong, and I'm cashin' in my chips. And I'm takin' you with me!"

Smiley drew his gun. He stood in the exact center of the room. He crouched a little and said, "I've been lookin' forward to this for years. It's a thing that has to be done. I'd as soon your men shot me as hang for it. I hoped to have some one else do it for me, and I was wrong. I should have known that this was the way it had to be."

"Mebbeso," nodded Kirby.

They could say what they wanted about Big Kirby, and they said plenty—but he was game. He could sit there and not even look at Smiley's gun, with his fat sagging on his once-powerful frame, his eyes almost buried in the folds of flesh, peeking out at Smiley. He could sit there and condone his own executioner, reserving judgment, accepting the hand which Fate had dealt him.

Another memory smote Smiley and he raised the gun. He said, "If you've got prayers to say. . . ."

When the black horse came into the yard, the Duke flung himself to the ground. Spur men tried to get between him and the building, but Duke split them asunder. Smiley's gaze flickered out, recognizing the interference. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Duke drew his Colt in that ghost-like motion. He shouldered two Spur riders, sending them apart, his left hand plucking out the belly-gun and menacing other oncoming Spur men. Duke had a full view through the open door; he could see both Smiley and Kirby and gathered the situation into his nimble brain in one glance.

He fired, not from the hip, but at arm's length, aiming with great care. Smiley's gun flew from his hand. Smiley whirled, cursing, grabbing his right wrist with his left hand.

Duke said, "You damn fools! I just saved Kirby's life!" And the Spur men stampeded for the ranch house.

They had Smiley against the wall when the Duke strode in. Kirby had not moved. His voice was small, beaten. He said, "Turn him a-loose and leave us three alone."

The Spur men, now completely befuddled, obeyed. Duke said quickly, "Had to do it, Smiley. You should've waited for me, dammit! Yaas. Yaas, indeed. . . ."

Kirby said, "He had to come in. He's—"

"I know who he is," snapped the Duke. "She had him in a school when I saw her in Natchez, but any blind fool could see he's her son!"

Kirby said, "It was always Rose. I got over it, with Caroline, but I never could forget Rose."

"Fine way you showed it!" spat Smiley from across the room. "Leavin' her to die in a gambling house!"

"Rose liked faro," said the Duke gently. "She was a dead game sport, right to the end. Don't think bad of your maw —nor of Kirby, either. You two. . . ."

There was the sound of more horses. Gary and his gunmen were unslinging their artillery as they came in. The huddled Spur men, gossiping about the strange events of the day, were easy prey.

Eagle and Brady held them, making them raise their hands. Gary and the man called Buzzard stomped into the ranch house with a gun in each hand.

Gary said, "Smiley, they got the cattle. You're payin' us off, and I mean big. You crossed us, Smiley!"

The Duke did not make a move, but he spoke first, taking the floor. He said, "Smiley never meant to keep the 2 Bar O and Spur steers. He was stirrin' up trouble, that was all. You knew that, Gary. Smiley was tryin' to be avenged on Kirby. He thought Chad Rankin's men would maybe start something, that you-all could throw in with Rankin and ruin Spur. You knew that, too."

Gary said, "Git out of this, you! I'm takin' care of you in a minute. Right now, I want my money."

Duke said, "I pushed you into the open with that ace of spades trick, Gary. I thought Smiley'd catch on to you. But he's loyal—he stuck with you. Seems to me you're a bad egg, Gary."

GARY RANKIN'S Morgan came along, lickety split. The girl saw the pair holding guns on Spur men and tried to go by, but Tom Eagle threatened her, and she had to dismount. She came in and looked around.

Smiley said, "Mary! How is your dad?"

"He came to," said Mary gravely. She glanced at the guns and moved carefully out of the line of fire. Then she saw Smiley's limp right hand and cried, "You're hurt!"

"Just paralyzed," said Smiley grimly. "He hit the gun instead of me."

Mary said, "I saw your horse's tracks. I thought you'd shot father!"

"Kirby found one of those wooden carvings over here and thought Chad could ride again," the Duke cut in. "But the way that image got here, Smiley thought it would be a good trick to steal one and plant it where Kirby could find it. You see, Miss Mary—Smiley Dowd is really Smiley Kirby—son of Rose Carrigan and Big Kirby, who were married in St. Joe some years back."

Mary said, "You—he—what?"

Duke said, "Yaas. Yaas, indeed!" He was watching Gary out of the corner of his eye, but the wary gunman was not wavering in his attention, and Buzzard was not even listening to what went on.

Duke said, "Luckily, I was hereabouts years ago. . . . Yaas, years ago! I knew your mother, Miss Mary. . . . Maybe she spoke of Happy Jack?" He waited, more eagerly than he would have admitted.

Gary snorted and said, "I want my money!"

Mary hesitated, then she said, "Happy Jack? Oh, yes! Mother did speak of you."

Duke said hastily, "Never mind! I can

Wrecks and Runaways

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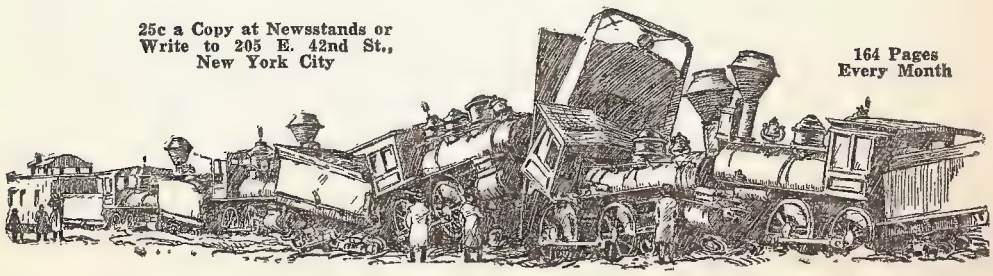

guess. . . . So Kirby is Smiley's father, but there was a—slight misunderstanding, and they never got together. Until now. But it will be all straightened out when we ascertain who shot your father. I hope it was Gary!"

"Huh!" said Gary. "I better git my money right quick, or I'll shoot somebody!"

There was no circumventing the steady attention of Gary and Buzzard to their business. Outside, the Spur men were helpless under the rifles of Brady and Tom Eagle. The sheriff should appear at any time, Duke thought, but what could he do, except start the shooting and get a lot of people killed? Maybe there would be another hunk of lead for the Duke, too. The last one had been too close, as it was. He stared at Gary resentfully, wondering if it had been his shot which almost ended the somewhat fantastic career of the Duke.

Kirby's voice strengthened. He said, "I'll pay my son's obligations. I'll be glad to assume them—if he is willing."

Smiley's face worked. He said, "I want nothin' from you! If Duke hadn't come."

"Yaas!" interposed Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Just put aside your weapons, Gary. Kirby will pay off! How charming! Settles the whole thing, my little chickadees. . . . You've got the cash here, Kirby? How much is it, Gary?"

"Ten thousand dollars!" said Gary.

The Duke said, "Waal! Waal! Waal! Ten—thousand—dollars. . . ."

"I've got it," said Kirby. "And I'll pay it."

"No!" said Smiley

The big man heaved out of his chair. For a moment, Duke thought he would not make it. But Kirby was a strong man; he even managed to walk across the room. He threw aside a screen, and there in the adobe wall was an iron safe. Kirby perched on a straight chair which creaked under him and began twirling the knob, working the combination.

"Ten thousand dollars!" thought Duke. "Right here, on the premises: What a shame! What a lot of money for these dunder-headed, two-bit, would-be night riders!"

Somehow, Gary was most watchful of the Duke. He seemed to sense the opposition in the big fellow. He said, "You! Unbuckle yore belt! I'll feel better with your gun on the floor! Buzzard, you watch the others. This-here big one's a snake!"

The Duke fumbled with the buckle of his gun belt. It seemed to him that afar off he could hear the clatter of oncoming hoofs. He would have to chance that his ears were as acute as he fancied.

His prominent, slightly bulging eyes went past Gary, to Mary Rankin. . . . She sure looked like her maw. He tried to give her a signal which would not be recognized by Gary.

He dropped the belt, walked away from it under Gary's urgent gun. Gary stepped next to Smiley, against the wall. He bent his knees, groping with his left hand for the belt, but never taking the .45 from Duke.

Buzzard had his back half-turned, covering Mary and the oblivious Kirby, who was intent upon his task. Duke waited, counting the split seconds. Gary's hand reached the gun, and started to straighten up with it.

Duke's hands were half raised. He edged over, in front of Smiley. Without moving his lips, he said, "In my waistband!"

He waited one precious second, then fell flat on his face, hitting the floor with a tremendous thud.

He felt the tug at his belt. He heard the roar of the sawed-off belly gun. He reached for the holster trailing from Gary's hands, and thought even then what a quick lad that Smiley was! The boy had drawn Duke's gun and shot Gary in perfect rhythm with Duke's action.

BUZZARD was coming around. The ball was opened, the band playing. Duke had the holster. Gary was flopping around, trying to get his gun up. Mary Rankin dove along the floor and captured his wrist, holding it down, throwing her weight on the wounded man. Duke had a moment of panic as his gun failed to come loose.

Buzzard had first shot, of course, and he only saw Smiley. The little gun in Smiley's hand spoke late, his shot clipped

the ceiling and ricocheted harmlessly. Duke felt, rather than saw, that Smiley was hit.

Duke's weapon came loose. He pulled the trigger without aim, without thought. He saw the big slug smack dead center on Buzzard, saw the ugly man go over backwards. But he fired again, making sure.

He crawled to the door. Tom Eagle and Brady were undecided, staring alternately at the house and the men under their guns. As long as they did not know which way the wind blew, they would not be any use.

Eagle called, "Gary! You all right?"

Duke shot Eagle's legs from under him. Then he went after Brady, but that individual tried to run, and Duke caught him too high and killed him on the spot. Then there didn't seem to be anything left to do but take count. . . .

He had been right about the approaching hoofbeats, because there came Jib Cheatham with drawn guns, and behind him, at a more leisurely pace, a buckboard, to which were harnessed a pair of the most beautifully matched Morgans.

Duke said, "Ha! Are you all right, Miss Mary?"

Gary had quit, and was breathing hard on the floor. Mary had his gun and was staggering towards Smiley, who sat on the floor, his head back, blood on his shirt. She said, "Of course not! Can't you see Smiley's hit?"

Duke said, "Yaas! Yaas, indeed! That damn' little gun! Not very swift for more than one shot. Sorry, Smiley!"

The youth said, "It—was—a—good play."

Kirby was trying to get over to him, also. The big man was sweating profusely. He said hoarsely, "Get a doctor! Somebody ride to Rankin's place!"

Mary was cradling Smiley in her arms, crooning through her tears. Jib Cheatham came piling in and was shocked to silence and misery by the sight.

Duke said, "Won't have to ride for the doc. No! No, indeed! Kirby, you better go outside and meet your company."

Doc was climbing down from the buckboard. Propped on pillows, Chad Ran-

PICTURE OF A GRADE-A CITIZEN!

¶ Meet the kind of man who believes that any other nation and race is fit only for slavery!

¶ Meet the kind of man who believes only the rule of blood and destruction; who believes that decency, honesty and kindness are "decadent," weak, and foolish.

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BUY WAR BONDS TODAY!

kin's terrier face was thrusting itself inquiringly towards the house. Duke walked out with Kirby, not caring to witness the agony of the sheriff nor the maunderings of Miss Mary and that young scoundrel, Smiley Kirby.

Chad Rankin said, "Damnedest fool thing ever happened! Always was stiff on the right side, since that fool Kirby shot me with his fool trick—"

Duke said, "So! Waal, waal! You really did manage to shoot yourself, then?"

"Cleanin' my gun," said Chad Rankin. "Damn thing slipped in my bad hand. Went off. Wouldn't want anyone, not even that rascally Smiley Dowd, to get the blame."

Duke said, "*Ahem!* About time you two got together on young Smiley. . . . Also, Big Kirby, you might tell Chad that it was Rose who lingered in your—ah—dreams. If you two could forget that old rivalry—if you could forget this war young Smiley misguidedly started. . . . And if Chad Rankin could stop carvin' little fat figures. . . ."

Kirby said to Rankin. "You know who he is? He's that damn' Happy Jack used to rustle cattle hereabouts."

Duke took out the little red balls and began juggling them carelessly. He did the four-to-one-to-four trick while the two ranchmen gaped. He said, "Yaas! Yaas, indeed. Happy Jack, but that was long ago. Two women—Caroline Wiles and Rose Carrigan. . . . I lost both times, eh? You two have your children—they'll be getting married. I could tell that when Mary found Smiley's tracks and didn't inform that he was stealing her daddy's cattle. . . . Hard on the sheriff, eh? But that's life. . . . He sent the four little spheres in such a rapid circle that they seemed to make a red blaze in the sun.

He said, "Couldn't stand to see those dumb-heads, Gary and his men, take ten thousand dollars away from you, Kirby."

The fat man said, "I owe you money. You said you'd settle this thing for a price. You've done it. You convinced me not to move on the 2 Bar O that day you come over. You just about cleared up this whole mess, Bagley."

Chad Rankin said from his pillows, "I'll chip in on that. I'm short o' cash right now, but I'll give you a Morgan hoss—two, three of 'em!"

Duke whistled and Petey came, his head to one side, surveying the three men doubtfully. Duke said, "Give me a horse? What do *I* want a horse for? I got a horse."

He clambered aboard Petey, who seemed undecided whether to pitch or be resigned to yet another long ride.

He said, "Here's the little badge. It was fun wearin' it! Yaas, indeed!" He threw back his head and the bandage gave him a rakish, almost youthful air. He said, "Caroline and Rose Carrigan—both gone! I shall do myself the great honor of refusing a reward for straightening out the mixed affairs of their relicts! I shall content myself with the fact of my intellectual superiority over the men who were chosen ahead of me! I bid you farewell, and wish you good luck!"

He rode away to the south, his head high, his back straight.

Chad Rankin said, "Thet Happy Jack was allus a strange coot. He sure loaded it onto us, didn't he?"

Big Kirby said, "Yeah. He shore did. Can ye come in, Chad, and see how the boy and girl is doin'? I'll git a couple of the men to carry you. . . ."

Big Kirby was a pretty happy man. He decided not to say anything about the five thousand dollars he had paid Duke for services rendered to Rose Carrigan in Natchez, before her death, and for the dog-eared, almost illegible note the Duke had delivered to him, a note in which forgiveness had leavened much of the bitterness of Big Kirby's soul. . . .

He decided to let the legend of Happy Jack Bagley's return and conquest remain as part of Hay Bend's local saga.

He handed the badge to glum young Sheriff Cheatham, and said, "You jest lost the best deputy in Texas, Jib!"

"I just lost a whole heap of things," said Jib. Then he added quickly, "But you're right about the Duke. He acted quick and he acted right. He's a fine, honorable gent!"

And Big Kirby said, with a straight face, "Amen!"

THE END

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

·ABE MORGAN·

(1) Abe Morgan was one of those men who would rather drive a stage than eat. It was well for the progress of the West that such men existed, for in the early days transportation was the most important factor of all. Abe was a familiar figure to pilgrims on the long haul between San Antone and San Diego.

Abe's reputation was of the highest. Come fire, flood, renegades or redskins, the coach kept rolling. Only once did this rule vary while Abe was handling the ribbons.
On a lonely stretch near Taos, Apaches set the coach afire with burning arrows. Even then Abe brought his passengers to safety, by mounting them on his plunging team and fighting a running battle until they reached the sanctuary of the next relay station.

(2)

(3) His cleverness with the reins was equalled only by his dexterity with the whip. When the stage was held up under the menacing guns of two road agents, Abe waited with hands held high until one of the bandits dismounted to gather the passengers' wallets. Then Abe went into action!
He seized his whip and almost cut the eyes out of the mounted renegade; whirled in his seat and twined the long lash in a strangling twist around the throat of the second ruffian.

(4) He saved the lives of three cavalrymen whom he saw some distance off the trail, fighting a band of twenty Indian bucks. He swerved off the road long enough to yell to the soldiers to grab a mule and ride postillion fashion as he swept by. Which they did, and came roaring into the next town much to the astonishment and hilarity of the citizens. Abe had more adventures than you have toes and fingers. Only when the railroads made the stage-coach obsolete did he disappear from the ken of man. But he left a heritage of courage that will never die, for he was a first class frontiersman and a topnotch builder of Empire.

HORNED GOD OF BATTLE

Scobey fired at Big Bugle. . . .

By TOM ROAN

When Big Bugle, the bull moose, faced his antlered rival in a ruthless death-struggle for mastery of the high wilderness, only one thing could stop that savage feud and turn those horned monarchs to another, and a greater, battle. . . . That was their arch-enemy, Man!

WHEELING as if stung on the rump by a swarm of hornets, Big Bugle again sent out his challenging bellow. The flat, brassy sound, rocketed down through the timber on the western slope, and fell like a trumpet's blast on the marshland surrounding the lake.

It was not yet dawn; the call of late-October was in the air, and the bull was keenly alive to all the signs and the end-

less restlessness surging in his blood. The time for love-making and fighting had come again to the great upland meadows, the forests, and along the banks of the northern Idaho streams. In blustering bull-moose fashion Big Bugle was on the hunt and had twice scented a cow within an hour, but the uncertainty of the cold wind and the fretful shifting of the cow had thrown him off the trail.

To know that a cow with a soft light shining in her eyes was hiding close by was enough to arouse that strange mixture of love and fury in a bull, but Big Bugle's ire had soared to the boiling point when the arrogant bellow of a second bull came to his ears from somewhere in the woods behind.

His temper had been kindled to a killing rage two hours before midnight. A pack of wolfish dogs had pounced upon him in the brush a dozen miles down the valley, and crimson still dyed his antlers from the bitter engagement. The swift river below the lake had given him the advantage of the fight, once he had reached it after the dogs—coming in to attack like wolves—had tried to hamstring him and bring him down. Once with his rump backed into the icy water he had swept the bank with his fighting head.

Two of the dogs had died in the battle, and others had limped away to lick their wounds.

In the thick of it, a wild yelling of hunters in the distance had stopped the fight, otherwise Big Bugle might have kept up the engagement. But he had backed on into the water, still slapping dogs with his great shovels when they dared to swarm out, trying to hold him long enough for their two-legged masters to come with rifles and, one and for all, finish the affair.

Once in the swift water he had been the master of the situation, swimming upstream and almost straight across while the fierce current caught the dogs, sending them hurling downstream to a far landing below like bits of helpless driftwood.

The icy water of the river had sealed his cuts and there had been no loss of blood to weaken him. Every ounce of him was solid bone and muscle, rounded out by a summer-long browsing in the still lakes and warm valley to southward.

By nature, he was a quiet one, even timid, ready to turn tail and run at the slightest provocation. But now placidness had left him to make room for a dangerous temper and a full half-ton of fierceness ready to charge horn or fang.

Such periods of fury did not last long with a bull. After the mating season was over the great antlers would drop from his head as if Nature, herself, took a diabolical hand in the business of reducing him to an amazingly sorry looking figure of humility. Shorn of his fine fighting weapons, the call of the moose yards would be upon him.

He would seek them without bellow or bluster to tramp the snow with his fellows, the old bulls and the young, the cows and the awkward big calves, the entire lot doomed to remain in a close body for mutual protection, until the warm winds blew and the slow sprouting of the antlers started all over again for the fall fighting.

SWOLLEN now with importance, short neck arched, stump of tail whisking, he waited, both ears cocked, for his challenge to be acknowledged. The reply was not long in coming. The answer swung up the ridge from the darkness at the rim of the marsh, an echoing dare to come down and fight. The bull moved forward at a shambling trot.

He turned again, with a bellow gathering and rumbling from his throat, voicing terrible threats of what would soon be in store for the bull waiting for him. He swept the brush and limbs to his right and left, feet slamming down like hammers crushing twigs and dead sticks.

A great noise in the darkness made one appear great. Sometimes bulls broke in the face of it, the noise riding down their fighting spirit, and turned tail to the coming fray.

But the bull below was not to be bluffed. He came forward at his own shambling gait, head up and nose out, a cocky young fellow of eight hundred pounds. They met on a hard rise of ground covered with moss and wilted grass just above the wa-

ter, each halting at once to take the other's measure.

The young bull was the first to charge. He was as quick as a mink about it, but really not half so wise. He came in with a lunge, head down, depending on a smashing blow of the head to carry the older bull off his feet before turning his fury into a flank attack.

Old and wise to all the tricks of fighting, Big Bugle wanted no part of such a rush. He flung his body to the right, making a furious sweep with his head in a lightning rake to bring his antlers in behind the younger bull's great blades and cut his throat below the ear.

The slash drew blood, but it was not enough. The young one slung in, antlers raking the older bull's side as Big Bugle managed to swing clear of the worst of the blow.

The sheer lack of true fighting ability made the young bull a dangerous foe. Big Bugle knew it when they again swung apart to take each other's measure. The young one had probably never seen two bulls locked antlers to antlers, and dying on their feet helplessly facing each other. He came in for his second charge with the same reckless fury, and Big Bugle had to meet him head-on this time.

The antlers crashed, the noise of the blows rolling out on the lake, and they were hung head to head now. They sawed desperately to break the hold before the give-away came, and both bulls floundered back on their rumps.

Big Bugle had the worst of the fall, because he was on the side of the steep bank rising back from the water. He went backward and down clownishly, all four feet in the air for a second before he smashed heavily into the water and reeds. As he flounced up, a bellow of rage filling his throat, he saw a strange thing taking place above him.

A sudden ray of light had leaped from a few yards out on the lake to the mound. It had caught the young bull in the full sweep of its brightness, and as if hypnotised there he stood, the fight forgotten and only a dazed look of spellbound awe in his eyes, the glare silhouetting him sharply, playing along his handsome coat.

A yard-long red streak from a rifle's muzzle spoiled the picture, its sound a splintering crescendo of harsh echoes that arose as a shattering shock to paralyze a bull's blood.

Beauty fled with the echoes. The young bull stood for one moment longer. A tremor swept over him, and he was coming down, knees bending, head lowering. A bright streak shot from above his eyes, a red ribbon darting and faltering in the early light. He slid forward on his nose and knees, breath coming out of him in a grunt from the shock of the fall as he struck the hard ground.

Big Bugle wheeled and started to run as the light swept furiously in his direction, trying to find him. It caught him through the reeds for just a moment, outlining him as he flung from the water and fled. A second shot crashed. There was a slapping sound as a bullet drove through the left shovel of his antlers, and he was gone, a smashing fugitive from death, vanishing in the brush as dogs somewhere set up a sudden barking. A flat-bottomed boat on the water swept on to the mound with the crouched figure of a man in the head of the boat still swinging the jack-light.

LANK SCOBEY swore at the Indians and dogs in the boat behind him as the reverberating crash of his second shot died away. A tall, lean man in baggy brown, he stood on the wide plank seat in the center of the leading boat, gander neck craned, sharp face beneath the long bill of his cap giving him the look of some bird of prey as he peered into the shadows.

"Pitch out the dogs, you fools!" he cried to the men in the boat behind. "Maybe now they can drive that second bull back to water an' at bay."

There were five men in the first boat. Old Long Tooth, the Blackfoot, crouched on his stringy hams in the bow to handle the powerful jack-light. Lame Wolf, a big Bannock of forty-odd, handled a paddle between Scobey and Long Tooth. Behind Scobey was One Eye, another Blackfoot handling a paddle, and in the stern, sat the huge, fat bundle that was Wills Crookshank, taxidermist, trapper and poacher.

Indians and dogs filled the second boat. For a week now, with already nearly a score of various kills to their credit, Scobey and Crookshank had found this ideal hunting country.

A sly visit to the country during midsummer had caused Lank Scobey and Wills Crookshank to move in with gusto. As professional hunters would, they had hired Indians and whites who were not afraid. They had come with horses and dogs, pitching their camp on a tall, well-sheltered island in the middle of the river.

To northward the valley walls narrowed away into a mile-deep canyon that had no outlet at the head where the river came in as a gigantic waterfall. The signs in the canyon had told keen eyes that it was a natural hole-up for big game, a grand hiding place for highly-prized trophies. Once disturbed in the lower valleys the animals would head this way, and dogs and horsemen could drive them straight into the trap to make the slaughtering terrific.

The common decency of sportsmanship had outlawed hunting with a jack-light years before, but mere law and a promise of a heavy fine coupled with a hitch in jail was not enough for some men. A man had to be caught red-handed before he was fined and jailed!

Lank Scobey and Wills Crookshank were cold-blooded businessmen and out to reap quick and easy money in the forbidden territory of a year-around game preserve. Elk teeth alone brought from twenty to forty dollars a pair, and November would bring the Eastern dudes with their tenderfoot ambitions, their fine guns and fine but often clownish riggings.

No proud would-be hunter would relish the idea of coming West without returning home with a gloriously mounted head of the dangerous wild animals he had encountered face to face, and Lank Scobey and Wills Crookshank furnished such men heads to exhibit to their friends back home.

The young bull on the mound was a good specimen. It would warm the cockles of the heart of some conceited ass. Even men who really made their own kills did not always get a good head. Properly mounted with a brass or copper plate underneath, that head would bring anywhere from three hundred to five, according to the dimensions of the would-be hunter's pocketbook and the flexibility of his conceit.

Such a head as the one lying on the mound should have been enough to make a man happy, but it was galling to lose the fine bull that had turned and shot away in the brush. Had the light caught him quietly, as only a sudden glare in his face, he would have stood staring and blinded, too amazed to wheel until the bullet drove home. Now he was on the run, but the eight dogs from the boat behind were already in the water to start the chase.

By sunrise the dogs would either have the second bull at bay or driven up the canyon. That thought cooled Lank Scobey's temper as the boat grounded against the knoll. He stepped gingerly forward to get past old Long Tooth and the jack-light. Just as his foot touched solid ground the devil arose with a lurch to meet him.

The young bull had come up with a snort, still blinded by the light. In a rush that was quicker than the snapping of a finger, he plunged forward. Lank Scobey went down with a yell. There was a crash, a fierce yelling behind him, and the bull was in the boat, plunging forward blindly, knocking out the light.

It was over as quickly as it started. The boat was upset, men and guns flung headlong into the water, everybody cursing or shouting, and the young bull charging hell in the reeds and water, as terrified as the men themselves in his one mad aim to get away from here as quickly as possible. And he was gone before anyone in the lot could recover from his fear and the shock of the icy water.

BIG BUGLE, tearing and lunging through the brush and trees, headed straight for the mouth of the canyon. The little cow—the much-sought prize only of a short while ago—had broken cover ahead of him, startled into a wild get-away by the sound of the shots and the baying of dogs along the rim of the lake. He saw her in the awakening light as he bore back to the lake.

She shied suddenly, startled again and went crashing and splashing into the reeds in quick terror of something in the brush

to her right. The smell of a bear making his own hasty retreat in the undergrowth brought an angry snort from Big Bugle as he passed the spot.

He was beside the cow when they came to the head of the lake. No reeds or grass grew in this icy strip. They galloped along tirelessly in the same lumbering gait, their heads up and eyes wallowing as they watched behind as well as ahead, until they were given another violent start from sudden danger.

It looked as if every animal in the valley had been startled by the shots and had started heading for the canyon as fast as their legs would carry them.

Two big cougars had appeared behind them, one of them slightly in the lead. Big Bugle saw them the moment they came out of the underbrush, and behind them was the bear, a bundle of hair-on-end and a snarl on his face, coming like a big, black tumbleweed bouncing along the ground in front of a strong gale.

Lightning storms, and drowning rains coming with howling winds and floods, often made a wild animal forget his natural enemies, but the scent of men and the crack of their guns were far more terrifying than any storm that ever blew. A four-point buck was behind the bear before they were through the narrow pass, and neither bear nor deer paid attention to the other.

The bear and the cougars took to the ledges soon after they were inside the canyon, but it was a milling conglomeration of tense expectation when the great falls were in sight. Moose, deer and elk were here, the total running up to more than a score. In that wall-eyed mingling herd were a few wild cattle and a lone burro with a dingy-gray coat and a snow-white muzzle, an object of absolute unconcern as he stood on a short little rise calmly nibbling at some loco weed.

As if taking a pointer from the burro, some of the excitement wilted until the sounds of dogs in the distance turned everything into pop-eyed confusion again. Ahead of the dogs came another rush—a deer, another little wild cow, and a one-eyed old bull buffalo ostracized from his kind and forced to risk the dangers of the hills alone.

And then, behind that trio followed the young bull that had been shot, still running for his life and blood covering his face where the bullet had ripped a long, ugly tear in his forehead.

Two young bulls going crazy with fear made a dash for it even as one of the men in the distance started blowing a horn to call off the dogs.

It was suicide on the part of the two young bulls. The dogs charged them in spite of the insistent calling of the horn. In a breakneck fight they got beyond the dogs. A sudden crashing of rifles—sounding like timber breaking all around—dropped them, sending them rolling and sprawling, the maddened dogs swarming and ripping over them.

Tom Roan usually strikes pay-dirt with his double-barreled action yarns of American wilderness kings—whether man or beast! He does it again in *10 Story Western, Dime's* brother magazine. For thrilling Western fiction don't miss Roan's top-flight novel of the rise and fall of an outlaw empire, "CATTLE POOL GUNMAN," in March *10 Story!* On sale Feb. 10th!

LANK SCOBEY and Wills Crookshank were in the highest of spirits when they came up on horseback after a hasty trip back to camp. They rubbed their hands as they looked over the many fine kills in front of them merely for the sighting and shooting.

There would be no hurry about anything from now on. Ignoring Crookshank's frowns against it, Scobey had passed a number of gulping rounds of whiskey among the Indians. Long Tooth and One Eye had gone back down the river to boss the business of bringing up the boats with the first big loads of camp equipment. By noon the camp would be

established here on a level shelf against the west wall of the canyon mouth above the river. The canyon mouth could be opened to run in more kills or blocked at will.

No poacher, no gang of poachers anywhere had ever struck better luck. There would be heads enough before this thing was done to keep a man busy mounting and quietly shipping them out of the country all winter.

Lank Scobey and Wills Crookshank were still congratulating themselves when the last boatloads were heading up the river and a rifle rolled its far-reaching report from the direction of the lake. They turned, looking down the canyon, and stiffened as if something had riveted them to the rocky shelf underfoot.

A canoe manned by two men carrying light camping equipment had appeared. The little craft was going swiftly across the lake, making a line toward the river four hundred yards away that would cut off Long Tooth and One Eye with the boats. The men in the canoe were roughly dressed, but their broad-brimmed gray hats were enough to tell any poacher that he was staring at a pair of forest rangers. Crookshank was the first to speak in an unsteady voice.

"It looks like we started crowin' a little too soon. An' look!" He jerked up a big hand to point as another crashing report of a rifle spread itself across the lake. "There's what whiskey does to Indians, you thin-brained damned fool! This is goin' to be murder on our hands. *Look!* By Gawd, it—it *is* murder, Lank!"

Another reverberating report swept out across that shining water in the distance. The shot had come from the leading boat where old Long Tooth sat and was just in the act of lowering his rifle as a crash ripped from the second boat where One Eye crouched.

Crookshank swore as he saw the ranger in the forward end of the canoe lurch back. He had seen Long Tooth's bullet cut water a foot ahead of the canoe. That old devil had been shooting as a bluff to turn the canoe back, but One Eye was shooting only to kill. The wounded ranger slid to one side, then slumped down among the duffle as the ranger behind him suddenly opened fire.

"Now it's a sell-out!" snarled Crookshank. "I've told you forty times, damn you, that you can't give whiskey to old-timers like One Eye an' that fool Long Tooth. It goes to their heads. . . . Look! There goes your second ranger!"

The ranger was spilling himself over the side of the canoe. As he struck water he gave the canoe a violent tilt that tumbled the man in front of him into the lake. In a moment one could see what the ranger was up to. He was trying to find some shelter for himself and his companion, for four rifles were blazing at them from the boats now laden with enough evidence to throw a man in jail without having murder attached to the charges.

"Damn it, Lank, we've got to stop it somehow!" All the blood had gone out of Crookshank's huge, round face as he stared at the mess with bulging eyes.

"Maybe—maybe we don't want to stop it now, Wills!" Scobey's voice was thin and hard, a whimper of fear. "We don't want a rope wropped 'round our necks, an' that's what'll happen. That ranger who was in the front of the canoe caught a ball in the head. I saw the blood as he pitched out in the water. There ain't but one thing to do now.

"You know what that is, Wills." He turned his gander neck and looked at Crookshank. "I ain't goin' to jail, Wills. I don't figure on hangin'. If you ain't got sand enough to start fightin' a rope from 'round your neck, then you'd better start runnin' right now."

With that, Lank Scobey picked up a high-powered rifle and started back along the ledge at a trot. After a few seconds, Crookshank started to grab a weapon and follow him. In terror and desperation he was then cowering back, looking upward and across the rushing water below to a high hump of rock and brush down the canyon.

Two more forest rangers had appeared up there on horseback and were staring with unbelieving eyes at the fight. Lank Scobey must have seen them a second later. A jarring report of Lank's heavy rifle churned up the river, and both horsemen were suddenly wheeling out of sight.

Wills Crookshank—never a real killer when it came to men—found himself run-

ning along the ledge toward the waterfall in the distance. In his half-blind fear he had forgotten all about that terrorized herd of wild animals his once-cunning brain had helped to trap. . . .

IT WAS confusion among the aminals again, a milling terror-stricken lot to the last one except the burro. That little jackass still stood on the knoll chewing loco weed and calmly eyeing the situation as if it were an everyday affair with him, while the rest of the mad mob had swung across to the western side of the river.

The men in the laden boats had won the first round of the fighting and were coming on, leaving one dead ranger and another sorely wounded as he still clung to the side of the canoe and managed to keep the body of his companion afloat.

The wild herd had no place to go, yet Big Bugle led a mocking charge for a couple of hundred yards down the tall, rock-bound bank of the river. In his madness it looked as if he would brazenly lead the way out of the trap, but at the sight of the man coming up the canyon, he wheeled back with the little cow and the wounded young bull following him, his high-strung nerves no better than any of the rest. Held by panic and fury, he passed the one place where the river could be crossed and the wall-eyed herd followed him in the beating cloud of dust.

A man not entirely robbed of his senses by fear would have headed for the cliffs where he might have had some chance of climbing to safety like a cat on a jagged wall. But the fat man came right on like one driven crazy by the noise of the shots and the yapping of the equally crazed dogs behind him.

No brave streak in Big Bugle prompted his second charge. The herd had closed up behind him, gouging him with horns and antlers as if to tell him he had jumped to the leadership of this thing and was going to have to carry through! At the edge of the falls they had him swinging back, running now to keep from being torn down and trampled to death under the sharp hoofs behind.

His rump dripping blood from the horns and antlers, he still tried to avoid going straight toward that fat figure, but there was soon no place for him to go except straight toward the man in the thinning dust clouds ahead. The man stopped, a pop-eyed thing frozen in his tracks with fear, and then he was blazing away with a six-shooter in each hand.

A bullet caught Big Bugle on the side of the jaw. He heard the little cow bawl as another bullet raked her shoulder. All sanity left the bull. The smell of blood, the bawling of animals and the knocking of antlers and the horns of the wild cattle behind him turned him into a running fool.

In the teeth of it, the man—both six-shooters now empty of bullets— wheeled to flee. He might have made it to a safe spur of the riverbank and clung there until the herd passed. But his wheeling and running showed the thundering bull that this two-legged thing was afraid, and in his fury he charged instead of trying to swing past the man—something he might not have done had the fat one faced him.

Big Bugle's head went down. A screech of agony shot higher than the din of pounding hoofs and fearful bawling as the great antlers struck. They came up, a thousand pounds of half-flying bull behind the blow, and the man was literally aboard damnation itself, a fat thing swaying and flapping from side to side like something caught in a huge cradle and being torn to death in the air.

The bull did not stop when he flung the man clear and saw him disappear in the dust and hoofs behind him. The dogs were coming by this time. Big Bugle had tasted his blood, and the devil was in him to charge those brutes. But he found the herd deserting him when he reached the place where the swing to the eastern side of the river could be made. It took the courage out of him, and he wheeled to make his getaway with the rest, a wild-eyed leader suddenly shorn of his rank and finding himself bringing up the rear behind a little black cow.

The dogs—nearly a dozen and a half of them now and free to do as they pleased —came on, their yapping knowing no bounds of delight as they saw the herd fleeing from them. They struck the broad ford, bobbing and churning water as they

fought their way across to carry on the chase.

It was not fair to be hounded both by bullets and dogs, but life was rarely fair in the wilderness where death always walked the land, crawled on its belly, or flew with the wind. A young bull's mother fought for her calf from the time it was born until the calf grew large and strong enough to shift and fight for itself. It was the same with the birds of the air, the bear and the wolf, the cougar and the mink or the gopher in his hole. Sudden and violent death was their neighbor, their brother, their keeper.

Dogs and men were the worst of the lot. The wild things killed to eat. The rattlesnake struck when his belly was empty, and buzzards usually only took away the leavings of the dead, making the air pure again. But man and his dogs killed for the sport of it—and even the best of sportsmen often killed seven times more than they ever intended to eat, and left it to rot on the ground.

Hate as well as fear wheeled Big Bugle to meet the dogs as they came over the bank of the river in a noisy string. Here was something he could fight at close range. He caught a dog as he had caught the fat man, slinging the life out of him. As he flung the first brute away he saw the young bull he had started to fight on the mound, the feud of love forgotten.

With the two bulls turning to fight, the herd started taking a hand in it. A little wild cow was the first. She came into it, herself like a charging bull, wicked horns raking, one of them catching a dog and flinging him away in the air with one last cry.

Now others were in it. Soon it was a fan-shaped charge, the noise of the shooting in the distance forgotten. Before the startled dogs could get away, four of them were dead or dying on the grass, and the rest were in full retreat as they voiced their woes and headed back for the white-flecked river.

Made bold by the heat and fury of the battle, Big Bugle followed them to the middle of the river, and then tried to swing back as the noise of shots closer at hand came to him. The dogs had turned, making the air ring from the safety of the west bank, challenging the herd yet for trouble, and Big Bugle found that he could not turn back.

The herd had followed him, made angry again by the fierce noise of shots ringing down from the rim of the canyon and the faint but even more startling smell of burning grass.

LANK SCOBEY was stricken with his first cold, sick feeling of fear in the pit of his stomach when he realized that the fight was running longer than he wanted it to run.

The boats had come up, sheltered by the rock-walled east bank of the river and bringing the last of the dogs and the camp equipment. He was more than four to one here, and he had the advantage of the rocks as bullet-proof shelter along the rim of the broad ledge. He could also sneak some of the men up the river to make it hot for the two hard-fighting rangers on the high rim across the canyon.

"But that ain't all of it," he growled to stringy old Long Tooth now squatting behind a rock just to his left. "You don't usually run into four rangers in a wad unless they're playin' the back country for somethin' big to catch. Then there's the chance of one of 'em sneakin' away an' goin' for help. Two men can damn nigh hold us here until midnight."

He did not know what had become of Wills Crookshank. He did not care right now. Crookshank was one of the kind who had been known to run in the past. Such men were better out of the way than hanging around to worry the heart out of a fellow.

The wounded ranger with the canoe had finally made his escape by swimming beside the craft with the dead man still hanging to its side until he was out of sight in the reeds.

He was down there in the dry somewhere now, switching from one high place to another and firing into the mouth of the canyon, so that no one on the ledge above the tied-up boats would dare to try to make a run.

Once the fight was over and the bodies of the rangers hidden in the bottom of that deep lake, the quick killing, the head-skinning and antler and teeth-taking of the prized animals up the canyon would

be hurried through. By midnight, if all went well, the job could be done and the boats turned back downriver for a hurried run out of the country.

But with the fight dragging, a man could think of all kinds of things going against him. Some of these fool rangers had been known to send smoke signals from the high peaks. . . .

"At that, they'll have a hell of a distance to come." Scobey looked at the unpredictable Long Tooth and snarled the words at him. "I still believe we'll beat it out—"

He caught himself, staring in the direction he saw Long Tooth staring. A ball of smoke was rising up the canyon, then he saw another, then another.

"Good Gawd!" he cried, "look what's happenin' up yonder!"

He made the mistake of rising. A bullet wailed just over his head, splattering to pieces on the rocks to his left as the crash of a rifle filled the canyon from the rim.

He dropped back, another cold, sickly pain of fear filling him. Even the sudden burst of rifle fire along the ledge that returned the shot from the rim could not make him take his stare off the head of the canyon.

"One of them rangers on a hoss has sneaked back up there!" He groaned. "That grass is dry along the foot of the cliffs, an'—an' the wind's pickin' up this way. They're tryin' to smoke us out!"

BIG BUGLE charged headlong into the dogs the moment he reached the rim of the bank. As his head went down for the rushing killer stroke, the first faint smell and taste of smoke came to him. The snort that came from him was more of sudden fear than hate for the dog he was about to catch. Fire was the one thing in the entire wilderness that could be worse than man, gun and dog.

The dogs fell back as the herd charged and smoke rolled down the canyon on a strong gust of wind ahead of the fight. In a matter of moments it was a riot. Some of the herd had caught a glint of the fire behind. Another tremendous bawling was going up. It could not do a great deal of damage here, and would burn itself out by the time it reached the narrowing walls of cliffs down the river. Yet it was enough to strike insane fury into the herd. Even the burro wheeled down from his arrogant perch. Tail in the air and ears cocked, he was coming now and filling the air with a lament of braying.

Down the canyon on his broad ledge, Lank Scobey heard the noise. The smoke had become thick around him. Some of the men were already trying to desert him.

Lank Scobey noticed that old Long Tooth and One Eye were among the first lot trying to make their sneak-out.

Scobey jerked up his gun and fired at Big Bugle. Other men were running and yelling now, and like a startled buck Scobey was flinging himself into the rush. Before he had gone a yard, a yelping dog coming up from behind knocked him off his feet, then other dogs were swarming over him.

It was Big Bugle that caught him. A sweep of that great cradle lifted him from behind, hurled him in the air and sent him crashing down on the head of the young bull just behind. The young bull shook him off. The cow behind stumbled over him, then the hoof, the dust and smoke followed, each hoof a slashing knife.

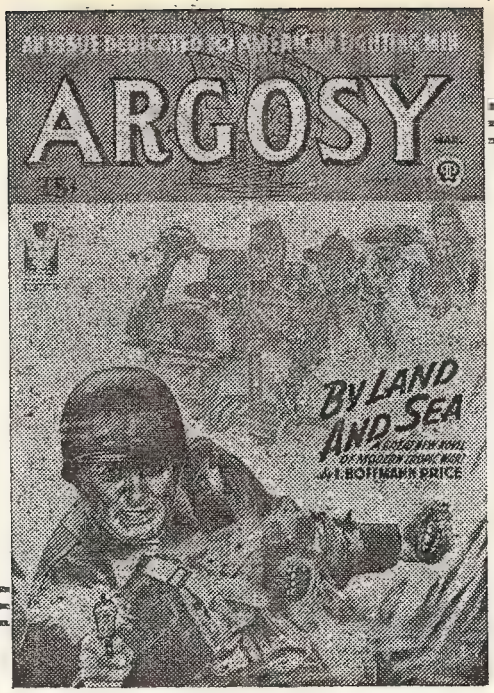
Other men and dogs went down. The herd swept on, the great fighting head in the lead swinging right and left, sometimes making a downward and upward rake.

Beyond the end of the ledge the way led down to the water. Big Bugle led the way into it and was soon swimming. He headed on for the lake with half the herd following, the other half including the burro, going on down the river.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the little cow coming up beside him to the right. He swam closer to her, body deep in the water, big antlers spread like a protecting shield at her side. Behind them destruction lay in the narrow neck of the canyon, and the rangers were taking full command of it.

But such things did not concern a bull-moose now that he had made his getaway with the little cow beside him. It was merely the end of another one of those wilderness adventures. . . . And the beginning of another. . . .

This Issue Is Dedicated to American Fighting Men



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ONLY THE STRONG—

Tom spurred to point, firing his six-shooter into the herd. . . .

By VAN CORT

As dependent on his sense of power as on the very air he breathed, Lanson Dane, range-baron, knew that he must whip the youngster who was too proud to ask any favor—or he, himself, would die!

FALSE dawn tinted the east with a streak of faint green which crept over sage and sand and tried to make shadows of rocks and trees. Tom Ford sat bolt upright in his blanket and cast a hasty cautious glance, first at the camp and then at the herd.

Mackail was lying on the other side of the dying fire, sleeping soundlessly, with his usual comically innocent expression on his face, his head on the saddle skirt, his right hand on his drawn gun. He opened a dark blue eye as Tom stirred, and then at once closed it again.

Tom reached out with one hand and put on his hat in the same motion with which his other buckled his belt. As the blanket slid off him, he put on his smooth-

worn cowhide vest and wiggled his toes into the tops of his boots.

The challenge of the day was upon him. A distance away, in a shallow dip, the herd was still bedded down, and old Fiber, practically asleep in the saddle, was circling it slowly. As he saw Tom blowing up the fire and filling the coffee pot at the water hole, Fiber rode up the slope and picketed his horse with the three others, and then quietly squatted down on his heels to wait for the smell of hot Java and frying bacon.

A tough little brown man, he sat like a sentinel with the old Sharps rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Nice herd," he said at last dryly. "They got so they get up and go to bed like children that knows what's good for 'em."

Tom grinned at him. "An' they weren't even reared together, at that. . . ."

The last time they had tallied it was three hundred and five head. They had mavericked and brush-popped their way north from the middle of Western Texas, starting with a small herd which they had taken out in lieu of their wages. That had been Mackail's idea; Tom Ford had put it into execution, driving a hard bargain with the boss of the Broken Spur.

Fiber, the old-timer who always talked about settling down but who never really believed he would, had just naturally strung along and had turned out to be quite an artist with a running iron. They had been two months on the way and their little herd had grown to almost ten times its original size. It was a motley one; old mossyhorns, three year olds and young stuff running together under the same road brand.

When the coffee was boiling, the bacon sizzling, and the cold biscuits toasting on the flat stone, Mackail sat up as if someone had poked him. "Hell of a time to eat breakfast—in the middle of the night." He said, utterly without humor, "Oh, for the life of the wealthy cattleman. And my mother wanted me to be a preacher!"

"You don't have to eat," said Fiber as he crammed his fist full of bacon strips and biscuit. "Nobody's urgin' you." He took a swallow of scalding hot coffee and squinted at Mackail over the rim of the tin cup. "A preacher, huh? You step inside a church, mister, and all them little pitchers on the wall turns right around."

"They ain't got no pictures in a church," said Mackail, poker-faced, between mouthfuls. "I was in one once."

Tom looked from one to the other as he ate. Breakfast was always like this. Mackail's careless sarcasm against Fiber's sometimes acid wit, but the three of them stood together. They were pardners under his leadership. Tom thought that the two wanted little but money out of this venture; they were tired of riding herd for someone else . . . Money in the pocket and a little excitement was what they were after. He was after bigger things.

"I don't trust this Dane," said Mackail after a while. "Why should he let us use his range. With this new herd, and on his land we'll be right in the hollow of his hand."

"I told you I did him a favor once," said Tom.

"Men don't like favors," said Mackail with eternal pessimism. "They don't want to be beholden, specially not for their life. Now if he was wanting to buy this cattle it would be different."

"Dane don't buy; he sells."

"Anyway, I don't like him."

"You never seen him."

They were interupted by Fiber, who silently like a cat had risen to his feet. His hand found the trigger guard of the Sharps. "Riders comin'," he announced, staring into the dawn. "Bout ten of them."

Tom stamped out the fire and the three men stepped hastily to their horses, pulled the cinches tight and mounted. Fiber rode back a hundred yards and waited.

"Trail cutters," said Mackail out of the corner of his mouth as the group of horsemen swung toward them. "No; too many," said Tom.

Except for one carried his arm in a sling, the approaching group rode with their rifles in readiness across the pommels. Seeing the two men on the slope they automatically split up in two parties, three of the men spreading out fan-wise, dismounting and cocking their arms.

"Let's give 'em a run for it an' circle back," murmured Mackail. "They ain't seen the herd yet. Their horses are winded."

"Wait," said Tom quickly. "It's Dane."

THE mounts were lathered, the men dusty. As they rode up, Tom Ford saw that Dane had aged ten years in the past six months, but none of the strength had left him. There was still that quality of leadership, backed by an ruthless determination to be master.

Most men accepted the leadership; a few rebelled and as a rule lost out. The rancher carried a justified contempt for all other men; a contempt that was almost pity.

Dane's bloodshot eyes looked clean through Tom. "What are you men doing on my land?" he said. "I allow no one to cross my range. Keep riding."

He did not expect to be disobeyed, and added casually to Gart, his foreman, who rode stirrup to him, "Get their names and outfit, if any."

Half a year before, Tom had shot and killed a man who had taken a raw potshot at Dane in the street of Bounty. Dane had not thanked him, but had told him he owed him a favor, and to name it.

Tom had seen the resentment in the other as he refused the favor, and at the same time he felt a rebellion at the man's superiority. Ambition had come to him, slowly and overwhelmingly. He wanted to emulate Dane. If Dane could rule and sweep a whole valley into his iron hands, then, so could others.

So he had changed his mind about that favor and asked about range. A man could never raise himself a stake by working as a cowhand for wages; not an impatient man. There was only one way, which most great ranchers had followed once upon a time. Fiber and Mackail were with him for the money and adventure. But they did not know Tom.

There was no recognition in Dane at all and Tom said reluctantly and somewhat resentfully. "Mr. Dane, you don't remember me? I'm Tom Ford. I brought that herd I told you about."

Dane's men turned in their saddles and saw the herd for the first time. In the shallow valley the animals were beginning to rise and browse. Dane's men had obviously been riding home from some trouble; sweaty and begrimed, they carried the recent memory of a fight.

The wounded man groaned in the saddle and said, "Lemme down, lemme down." The horses wheeled, and there was a scramble of feet as two men carried the fainting rider up to the fire.

Tom dismounted and brought the coffee pot out from behind the rock. "Give him a drink of this."

The man lay very still and ashen pale under the tan. His left armpit was soaked with blood. Dane sat detachedly regarding the dying man from the saddle. "Any of you fellows know any doctoring?"

Fiber slid out of the saddle and knelt by the man. He cut open the shirt and looked at the wound, took the man's pulse, then looked up at the rancher.

"I'm done for, Dane," said the man suddenly, before he went limp, his head rolling over to the side. Fiber removed his hat, but Dane kept his on.

He swore. "They'll hang for that," he snapped, then turned to the two men who had helped the dead man. "Pack him back to the ranch; we're wasting time."

They hesitated while Fiber, who was old and had no callousness in the presence of death, closed the man's eyes. "I saved an hombre's life once, with a wound like that," he said. "But I got to him sooner."

They lifted the dead and slung him face down over his own saddle. Dane looked to Tom again. "I remember you now. What do you want?"

"These are my partners, Fiber and Mackail," said Tom. "We brought our herd up here . . . I'd want about three months' grazing to fatten them up, like I talked to you about, that time."

Dane considered Tom and his partners; swift cool judgment in his glance. He gestured at the herd with his head. "Kind of a mixed bunch," he said pointedly. "You can have the grazing," Dane went on, "but anybody who rides my ranges, rides for me. Take your choice."

Choice of what? Tom thought. The rancher's roughshod attitude rankled in him, and he felt again the rebellion and envy against the man's obvious superiority.

He had a notion to refuse and say they would trail on, but Dane's tired look, his unnaturally aged appearance and the dead man slung over the horse aroused his curiosity.

"How much you pay?" he demanded.

"Seventy and found."

Mackail nudged him. "That's fightin'

wages," he said. Fiber sent him a look and winked slowly. Tom tried hard to gauge how badly Dane needed three accurate guns.

Tom looked to his pardners. "Done."

"Gart," said Dane, wheeling his horse, "Take these men and their herd to Yellow Creek flats, after that meet me, all of you, at the Beaver Hat. We're finishing this today."

Gart scowled at the three men. Dane plucked three gold pieces from his vest and rode over and dropped one each into the outstretched hands of Tom, Fiber and Mackail. He rode on.

Tom stared at the goldpiece. He had a notion to fling the coin on the ground, then he caught himself in time. He chuckled. "Rides a high horse, that hombre . . . " He shrugged, "Well, maybe if he can mount it he can ride it."

The herd was under way. Gart, who was in a hurry, rode a short distance from Tom's stirrup at point. He had been present in Bounty when Tom's shot dropped the bushwhacker and saved Dane's life, and Tom saw now that the little man had not forgotten. Guarding Dane's life was *his* job, and he resented Tom's act with a warped jealousy. He glanced now and again at Tom like a weasel.

"What's raising all the dust?" Tom demanded at last. "What makes the boss ride out in the night with half his crew? Trouble with cattle thieves?"

"Rustlers," sneared Gart contemptuously. "Mr. Dane don't have to bother about thieves. I can hang *them.*

Mister Tom reflected. "Hang 'em?"

"No," Gart went on, ignoring Tom's remark, "this ruckus is about a damned fool, name of Carl Crossman, who's dumb enough to take up range on Beaver Hat claiming he had rights to it . . ." Gart chuckled. "Any damned fool knows all of Beaver Hat is Dane range."

"So?" said Tom.

"He an' his outlaw crew's been popping strays out of the hills an' rounding up calves on the old Beaver range, slapping the Beaver Hat brand on them . . . an' that's funny when you know there ain't been nothing but Dane branded beef on Beaver for the last ten years."

"Maybe," said Tom, "Crossman thought the place needed a change."

Gart spat. "He's had the loco nerve to stand up to Mr. Dane and the Long Valley cattlemen's association." He laughed suddenly. "But he won't stand long. We caught three of them last night with a small vented herd. They're cottonwood fruit now." He laughed mirthlessly again. "Imagine anybody standing up to Mr. Dane!"

Tom tried to imagine that kind of man. Dane, and the Cattlemen's Association . . . He had seen Dane walk down the street of Bounty, owning the ground he trod. Men couldn't do without leaders, and when a man was a leader and strong there was a force in him that subdued people around him. It was a mystery, a magic. "And this Crossman, how about him?"

He's hangin' today," Gart snapped. "Get them friends of yours to hustle that beef along. Time's a'wastin'."

CLOSE to noon they rode down a wooded slope and saw plain the Dane ranch, an impressive spread of buildings and corrals, the main house with a long white-painted wood veranda running its full length.

Tom Ford had not seen a house like that before, and he thought it worthy of Dane. There was no business of the crew eating with the boss here; only the richest men in the valley set their feet under the long oaken table in the huge dining room. The governor of the state, senators from Washington, had been visitors . . .

Tom let his imagination run rampant as he stared from his saddle across the vast yard. To be owner of such a house . . .

"There's the bunkhouse, and the cookshack at the end," indicated Gart. "Tell the cook to give you a bit of grub, but be ready to ride in half an hour. I'll meet you here."

The three men slipped their horses into an empty corral after having unloaded their pack horse. "Don't like this outfit too much," declared Mackail, slinging his saddle onto a top pole. "So now we're working for this feller Dane. . . . You think that was smart?"

"Yeah," said Tom. "Ain't that some house, though!"

"It's big," said Mackail with lack of appreciation. Fiber was scratching his

chin. "He's a hard hombre when a man dies," he said. "If we're to take his money we'll have to keep our eyes open. You think the herd is all right, Tom?"

Tom nodded and repeated what Gart had let him in on. "Showdown's coming with this here Crossman; we seem to be a couple of extra cards that Dane needs in his deck."

"Well, I'm playin' my hand with my gun on the table," said Mackail. "Who said something about grub?"

"Weasel-face did." Fiber made a grimace.

They slung their bed-rolls in the bunkhouse and made themselves known to two men who sat solemnly on a bunk oiling their rifles and greasing cartridges. On another bunk the dead man was neatly laid out, his boots having been pulled off and hands folded across his chest.

Someone had stuck a thick candle stump onto the head end of the bunk and lit it; the flame flickered and smoked and made the shadow of the dead man's nose and eyebrows dance oddly over the face, making it seem alive.

"Friend of yours?" Tom asked of one of the men.

For answer the man stared brazenly into Tom's eyes while he demonstratively tested the lever action of his Winchester, ejecting the shells over the floor with loud clicks.

In the cook-shack, which was more than a shack, having a table that seated at least twenty-five men, a Negro cook in clean white apron served them roast beef and gravy, potatoes, beans and tomatoes. They washed down their last bites of apple pie with strong black coffee, lit their smokes and drifted outside to wait on the bench for the foreman.

A quarrel was in progress in front of the wide doorsteps of the Dane residence. Tom rose from the bench and began walking across the yard.

A new red-wheeled buggy was standing by the steps and in it sat an irate young lady, suitcase at her feet. She was jerking angrily at the reins. Gart, standing by the horse's head, was grasping the bridle. A kid cowhand at the end of the veranda and an elderly woman in the front door were watching anxiously.

"I told you to watch her!" Gart grated at the hand.

The man looked stubbornly at the foreman. "What you want me to do—take a shot at the boss' daughter?"

Gart quietly cursed the man and turned to the girl. "He told me you're not to leave the place. Them's *his* orders, Miss Gertrude. I'm just doing what your father told me." He spoke with angry impatience.

She was dignified even in her embarrassment. No one had a right to tell this girl what to do.

She said, with strained patience, still jerking on the reins. "You forget, Gart, that I'm twenty-one and free. Your domain is the range and the bunkhouse; remember that!"

Gart's face went tight. "At least *I'm* on your father's side," he said pointedly. "That's a heap more than can be said for you."

"That's not your business," she said sharply. The horse became unruly and Gart called to the cowhand to take it while he himself strode to the side of the vehicle, reached up swiftly and caught the girl by the wrist. In another moment he had forced her out of the buggy and flung her suitcase onto the verandah. "Get into that house and stay there till your father tells you otherwise!"

"Gart!" said Tom Ford. "You let go of Miss Dane's arm!"

Gart turned on him. "Get out of here, you loco saddle-tramp! Get out!"

Tom took a step forward and the foreman's hand went to his hip. "Steady," came Fiber's voice from the other side of the buggy. "I could easy nip a hole in you, mister. Just kind of relax."

"This is a nice outfit," declared Tom. "Real polite to ladies!" He indicated the suitcase with his boot and said angrily, "All right, Gart, put them back in the carriage."

The man, speechless with fury, stared at him. "You crazy fool!" he wheezed, his voice shaking. "Get out of here while you're still livin'!"

There was in him some of the same confidence and certainty that possessed his master. He could not grasp that anyone would buck Dane's authority. Tom saw that, and there was no mirth in his smile. "Get to it, little man!" he said.

Gart, with a look of unutterable, re-

lentless hatred bent down and replaced the bag.

The girl was rubbing her wrist as Tom guided her into the seat again and handed her the reins. "You can ride anywhere you please ma'am," he said quietly.

"I should thank you," she said, "but I can't. I'm only so sorry that you mixed into this. Oh, I'm so sorry. Please leave at once, whoever you are. You *must* leave at once; your life won't be worth a cent from now on. You don't know Gart, or my father!"

"Don't worry too much about that," he said and told her his name. "Maybe I don't scare easy." Then he added, "If you should run across a man by name of Crossman, tell him to stay clear of Beaver Hat ranch. Your father's laying for him there."

His guess had been right. A flush showed on her cheeks. "Do you know Mr. Crossman?"

He shook his head, then added, "But maybe I should envy him. Well, goodbye, ma'am."

GART, TOM and Fiber watched the dust of the buggy disappear down the road. The two men who had been cleaning their rifles in the bunkhouse had come out and were watching Gart. Behind them, on the bench against the wall, sat Mackail, whistling, his six-shooter resting on his crossed knee.

Gart turned to Tom. "You'll wish you'd never been born, sonny. I don't know why a dumb cluck like you should come a-blundering into a thing like this."

"I don't know you, Gart, but I do know you got no business putting your paws on any girl," Tom said. "If you want to get into my way over this . . . Well, that's up to you."

Gart headed for the bunkhouse. "You an' the other two saddle-bums better ride to hell an' gone out of here—pronto."

"You're het up," Tom said. "Let 'er ride, this time."

Shortly after, the three men watched Gart and the two riders get their horses out of the corral. They saddled quickly and loped out of the yard. "That dinner wasn't worth all this trouble," commented Mackail. "Now all we can do is to pick up the herd and trail on."

"Dunno," interjected Fiber. "It was a mighty good dinner. Best piece of apple pie I ever et. Wisht my mother had learned me to cook like that."

Tom went over to where the kid cowhand stood leaning against the veranda rail, rolling a smoke. "Look, son," said Tom, "what goes on around here? What's the trouble?"

The memory of seeing Gart being forced to say uncle was still in the youngster's

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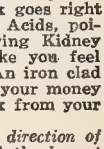

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amazed eyes. He stared at Tom with a mixture of incredulity and respect. "Crossman," he said, "rode into Long Valley three months ago an' took up the Beaver Hat range, claimin' he got it after his uncle, Slim Gannon, who was killed ten years ago. Well, he chased some of our crew off the place an' began ridin' herd on all the stray stuff he could find. Then, a while back, he meets up with Mr. Dane down to Saw River. From the way it looked to me I'd say Crossman faced the boss down; offered him to shoot it out then and there. Mr. Dane wouldn't do it. He faced a man like Mr. Dane down. I can't figure it. Mr. Dane ain't been the same man since.

"After that," the kid went on, "it's been one hell of a job to finish Crossman off. But the boss ain't lettin' up till he's done it. An' Miss Gertrude gettin' sweet on Crossman ain't helped none. Mr. Dane an' Miss Gertrude don't speak much these days . . . all of it," he added with youthful nonchalance, "ain't no skin off my nose. I don't figure to buy into anybody's trouble."

Tom said, "Which way is Beaver Hat?"

The kid gave him a look, then told him. He ended by saying, "You'll see the Beaver Hat ranch house lyin' on the bluff overlookin' the Saw River. That is if Gart don't kill you before you get there. He ain't never swallowin' that dose, mister."

"I know," said Tom and headed for the corral.

"Maybe that kid's got something," suggested Fiber. "When he says it ain't no skin off his nose. What are *we* buyin' into?"

"Tom's gone soft on the girl," said Mackail, rubbing his beard.

"I have not."

"Then why head right into somebody else's trouble when you got all you can handle of your own?"

Tom was saddling his horse. He turned on the others. "Maybe I started something when I saved Dane's life that time. Maybe I want to trail along now an' see if I didn't make a mistake."

"Stubborn cuss, ain't you?" said Mackail.

"All right," said Tom. "You two can ride back to the herd, or you can ride here an' wait for friend Gart to invite you to supper."

Mackail went into the corral and whistled for his horse. "I ain't doin' nothin' anyway . . ." he said. Fiber got his saddle down from the top rail and ambled bowleggedly after Mackail. "You should've seen Weasel-face's expression when he heaved that suitcase back in the buggy. It was worth more than a month's pay!"

"Which we won't collect, anyhow," said Mackail.

They found the Pine Ridge, and reached the end of it an hour and a half later, without having run into the Dane foreman. Winding into the distance, the Saw River ran its savage current at the foot of a steep mesa, upon the flat green surface of which, two hundred feet above the river, the Beaver Hat ranch buildings were situated. No wonder Dane coveted Long Valley and the Beaver Hat range.

"Well," said Mackail, "looks like we're gonna have our fill of goin's on. They're burnin' out Crossman."

Smoke billowed from the ranch house and outbuildings and drifted high over the river. From a wide semicircle small puffs of blue gunsmoke arose with disturbing regularity. The sharp, flat reports of the rifles drifted up to the three men. They squinted down.

A little bunch of men had retired from the burning house and had taken cover on the green flat behind the house and the river precipice. From there they returned the Dane's rifle fire with telling accuracy. Telling because the latter made no motion whatsoever to advance from behind their cover.

Tom made out Dane himself riding back and forth a short distance behind his men, as calm as if he were looking over a herd of cattle. Fiber took the words out of Tom's mouth:

"What's he think he is anyhow, a—damn' general? Ridin' there so high an' mighty. I sure wish somebody'd drop him out of his saddle."

Tom glanced at the old man. Fiber's voice was shaking with indignation; his black eyes sparkled. Mackail dropped his half-smoked cigarette and spat. "When he can't shoot it out with 'em he hangs 'em. When he can't hang 'em, he burns 'em out.

I told you, Tom, I didn't like that hombre nohow!"

IT WAS an impressive and a grim spectacle. The cornered men had no chance; they were afoot, and there was no question of escaping down the steep bluff. If they had shells enough, they might hold out till nightfall, and attempt escape under cover of the darkness. But no doubt, Tom reflected, Dane had taken this eventuality under calm consideration.

He must be riding high, he must have ground the whole valley into the hollow of his hand. Dane's word was law here, and even the high politicos were proud to sit at his table. But—and the thought struck Tom with overwhelming power—Dane must be afraid of Crossman, just the same! He must, since he was so dead-hellbent on destroying him. Was Crossman's presence such a challenge that all instincts in Dane commanded him to beat him down as a rival to his power?

"Gents," he suddenly addressed Fiber and Mackail, "did you ever have the—the damndest itch to be mixing into business that didn't nohow look like it was yours a-tall?"

Fiber patted his rifle, "A surprise attack on that right side of the enemy might do some real good."

Mackail broke his Colt and snapped the cylinder back again. "Let's get started," he said. "But don't forget we got to watch for Weasel-face. He'll be around—don't fret!"

Tom's plan was to descend the tongue of the ridge under cover, then to dismount and attack the right end of Dane's line from the rear, drawing its fire. Thus, by shifting their position they might force Dane's men to retreat, and thus give Crossman and his friends a chance to make a break.

Half an hour later they'd worked into a position behind a clump of alders, three hundred yards from the Dane men's right flank. The firing had simmered down to a steady, slow exchange of bullets. The little bunch of men on the flat still held the enemy's line in check.

Tom squinted at the sun. "If they can hold out till it gets dark, so much the better. We'll hold our fire till then."

Fiber suddenly grabbed his arm. "Look! Dane is drawing the other end of his line in. Now what happens?"

The answer was an unmistakable rumble of hoof-thunder from the northeast, which hitherto had escaped the old man's ears. Tom and Mackail were already looking in that direction, while Dane's riders, on hands and knees crawled in toward the center from the left end of the semicircular firing line. A moment later the bobbing heads of a sizeable herd of steers appeared over the top of a rise. Riders behind and on the sides were shouting and firing their pistols. "Weasel-face!" said Fiber. "I knew you could count on him to think that one up."

The avalanche of horns, hoofs and dust rolled toward the spot where the Dane riders had just been. The stampede would sweep the entire plateau with the relentless fury of confusion. Whatever breathed on the flat between the burned-out ranch buildings and the precipice behind them, would die, and what cattle could not veer off from the rim, would die too. "Hell," breathed Tom. "I should have let that bushwhacker alone!"

As Dane and some of his men drew further aside to give room to the approaching herd, a red-wheeled buggy wheeled into view. The driver, because of the terrain, had not yet seen the stampeding herd. The girl drove past them on their far right and headed for the smoking buildings and the men on the flat.

"Holy Sam Houston!" roared Fiber. "Dane's daughter! She must've gone loco!"

"She ain't seen the herd yet," Tom called, sprinting back to the horses. "She's tryin' to stop Dane from killin' Crossman by joining him! Come on, we're turnin' these steers!"

Mounted, swinging their slickers, the three men tore down the remaining slope, rowelling their horses, yelling like banshees. Dane had not yet seen his daughter in the trap, and, Tom saw, even if he had wanted to save her, he would have been alone.

As Tom, Fiber and Mackail headed for the girl, Crossman's men and Dane's as well ceased firing and stood up breathlessly

to watch. Gertrude Dane was now halfway between the burned ranch and the fence.

The girl had just now seen the herd. Without hesitation she began whipping the horse, still heading straight for a low boulder fence, at the mesa rim. A man, who must have been Crossman, stood up on its highest point, waving and yelling frantically for her to veer off.

The three men kept gaining on the buggy, cutting to the left to get between it and the herd. From his eye-corner, Tom glimpsed Dane, sitting his horse, stiff as a statue, his face sheet-white.

Tom roared at him: "What in hell are you waiting for, Dane?" Then the dust and thunder of the herd swept between them.

Swinging their slickers, firing their guns and yelling madly, the three men swept along the front of the thundering cattle avalanche. The head animals slackened their speed, then those behind them piled up and over, pressing ever forward.

The three riders seemed like three small pebbles attempting to stem a flood. They raced with the herd in the hope of milling it. Fiber was ahead of Tom, and the air was so thick with dust that Tom feared the oldster might race over the edge of the bluff before he realized it.

WHEELING his horse to give ground and ride back for a try in the opposite direction, he suddenly caught sight of Lanson Dane, yelling like the others, firing his pistol at the maddened animals, setting the huge bulk of his magnificent buckskin square up against the herd. It was as if the man, in a fit of stubborn grandeur, wanted to stop the crushing tide with the sheer force of his personality and presence. And even in this wild moment Tom realized that Lanson Dane would know no other way.

And the herd did stop! It boiled around the man, who, on his horse, seemed like a rock in angry breakers. Tom, spurring toward him, saw the beginning of a successful mill, if he could only get there in time. The rancher flung his empty gun in the face of the foremost steers.

But the pressure was too great; surrounded by the longhorns, the buckskin reared precariously, hoofs flailing over the thrusting horns. He stumbled to his haunches, twisted around and got up again . . . But without the rider.

Tom, trying desperately to reach Dane, saw the man dragging from the stirrup as the frantic horse sprang away from the onrushing tide of cattle.

At that moment Tom's own horse stuck its foot in a hole and spilled him. Mackail, coming right behind him, almost ran him down as he got to his feet.

"Get Dane! Get Dane!" he yelled, but Mackail did not hear him.

Standing behind the fallen horse, Tom fired point blank into the face of a steer, which at once piled up on top of the horse. He had to shoot fast at the next one and the next, killing them.

Mackail was circling to the left, shooting and yelling. Fiber, somewhere on his right, was not to be seen. The pistol in Tom's hand suddenly stopped kicking and he tore his rifle from the saddle boot.

In the interval before he began firing into the herd again, he thought he heard Dane's voice faintly in the distance. But it was the triumphant voice of Mackail: "We got 'em! We got 'em turned!"

The herd had split and was now milling right and left at right angles. Looking toward the bluff, Tom had an unearthly sensation of thunder stopping abruptly, as galloping bodies sailed helplessly into the air.

As suddenly as it had begun, pandemonium ceased. All at once there was no more herd, the last of the animals galloping to either side and wheeling halfheartedly back, leaving a curtain of dust. Tom put down the rifle and began reloading his six-shooter, while he kept calling to Mackail to ride after Dane's horse.

A man rode out of the settling dust, a puzzled and furious expression on his face. He caught sight of Tom Ford behind the piled-up steers, just as the latter slapped the cylinder of his Colt back into place. Both men fired at once.

The Dane foreman missed and threw down for a second shot, but his hand stopped jerkily in the motion. He tumbled backward out of the saddle.

Fiber came riding out of the dust. "You

all right, Tom?" His horse was limping. Together they went over to where Mackail had caught up with the buckskin.

Mackail had rolled his coat up and put it under Dane's head and was kneeling by him, trying to make him drink water from a canteen. But the rancher coughed it up again and the water was pink. Tom knelt quickly down and felt his pulse. "Where you hurt the most, Mr. Dane?"

Dane's glance fell upon him. "It happens in a moment," he said haltingly. "A whole life . . . All this land . . . valley. And then—in just a moment—it happens . . . it's gone. All just takes a moment . . ."

"Lie still," said Tom. "We'll get a doc."

"You get your grazing," gasped Dane. "You can have—all you want." Blood suddenly ran over his lips in two thin streams. "That horse always was skittish . . . skittish . . ."

Tom said, "A high horse generally is."

"Dad!"

Gertrude Dane knelt by her father, Crossman and two other men stood behind her.

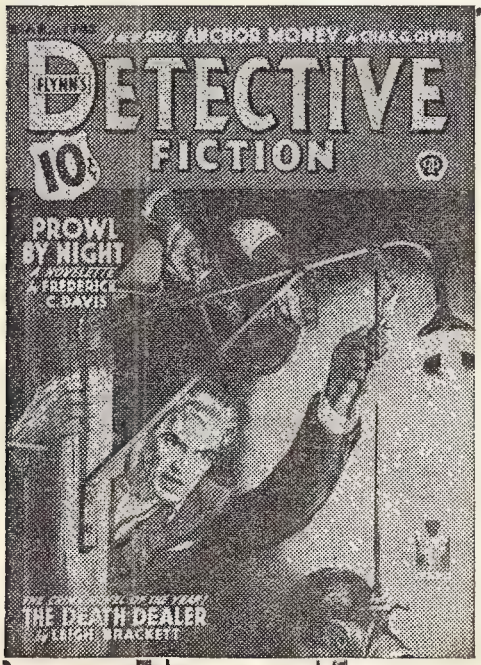
Lanson Dane took his daughter's hand. "I should have known better," he murmured and lay still. His eyes stopped moving.

She stood up without tears, and Crossman put his arm around her. "Well, he made his peace," he said. "He tried to save you from his own destruction, and gave his life."

The Dane riders were standing silently a short distance away. They kept staring at the dead man, as if unwilling to believe what they saw. Then, one by one, they began drifting toward their horses. "That's a score we still have to settle," said one of the men with Crossman, looking after them.

Tom was holding the Dane's buckskin by the bridle, patting its shiny neck. His eyes swept over the rich land, and he had a sudden urge to foot stirrup, and mount into the rich-silver-studded Brazos saddle. But he shook his head.

"Just take it easy, Tom," he told himself. "A high horse generally is skittish . . . Dane called the turn, at that. It takes long to mount the high horse, but just a small moment to fall . . ."



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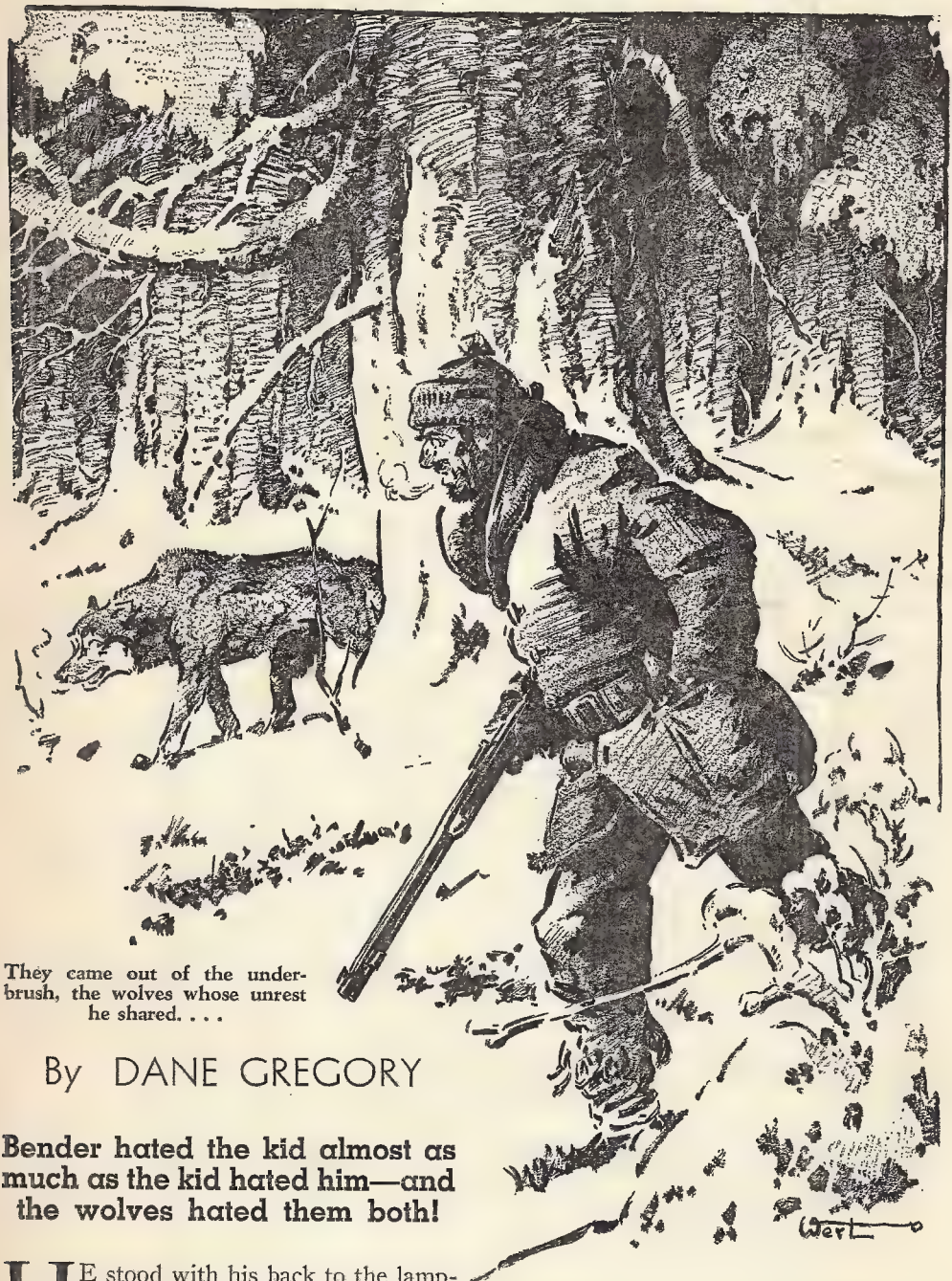

They came out of the underbrush, the wolves whose unrest he shared. . . .

By DANE GREGORY

Bender hated the kid almost as much as the kid hated him—and the wolves hated them both!

HE stood with his back to the lamplight so that the shadow of his lifted arm fell across the kid's white face. It was a long arm ending in a thick growth of hand, the fingers spread slightly to fit the crooked pattern where the kid's face was no longer white.

"I'd hate like the very devil," said Bender, "to be the kind of man that can't take a joke."

His slap had swung the kid across a tangle of Victor No. Three's and into the south wall of the cabin, imaginatively weather-stripped by some former tenant with colored excerpts from Boyce's *Saturday Blade.*

The kid's eyes sidled to a gaudy dinner party scene at which the hostess was announcing pompously: "I will now kill Hattie." That may have given him the idea.

"I'm going to kill you, Bender," he whispered.

He had broken at last, Bender saw. In a room saturated with the smells of anise oil and wolf fat, one cigarette tastes much like another—even when it is a cigarette through which a strand of horsehair has been carefully threaded. But the reaction is swift and violent for all that. The kid was still shaking a little with nausea, and that simple physical process had completed what days, weeks—more than a month—of Bender's studied malice had begun.

"I'm going to kill you," he repeated.

"Ah," said Bender. "Would you, now? Would you?"

The issue had been between them from the first, though only Bender had known that when they came up into the high country together.

It was virgin timber land freed temporarily from war-time restrictions because of the wolves that ran there in avid gray packs, a constant threat to the sheep and cattle below. The wolves could be had almost for the taking; never quite rational, they went wholly mad when the pungence of Bender's lure spread on the forest. For the rest, it was a land of living gold—mink, marten and, less than a rifle shot from the cabin, a Coulee City of beaver working overtime shifts.

Any seasoned trapper could have grown mildly rich on the bounty money alone. The peltries were pure cream. They would have to be diverted quietly into the black market, but with any luck at all Bender stood to take a fortune in illicit furs out of this lush strip before the government closed in.

Without the kid, that was to say. Objective always, he saw the kid as a chance obstacle that would have to be removed as his unwelcome partners had been removed in the past—by a campaign of systematic sadism that eventually would send him kiting back to civilization.

He was quite impersonal about this. He neither liked nor disliked the kid, whose three-hundred-dollar grubstake had been necessary to him after certain passages with a sleek blonde otter of a woman in Seattle.

"AH," SAID Bender. "So you're going to kill me, are you? It's as simple as that. He's going to kill me."

"I've had enough of it!" wept the kid. "Gypsum water in my coffee. Horsehair in my tobacco. A mustache on my girl's picture—why, damn you, Bender, I should have killed you then and—"

"There," said Bender.

He had swung his hand again. The kid's heel caught in the webbed trap chains and he went floundering to the floor.

"Me and Hattie," said Bender. "We'd just as soon be killed for a sheep as a lamb. Wouldn't we, Hattie old girl? Well, how about it, kid—still think you've got a good murder in you?"

"Yes," said the kid.

Bender turned back into the circle of lamplight. They had been hard at work when the kid's malaise claimed him, and a newly drawn wolf pelt lay wet and glistening across the spruce table. Bender picked up the knife beside it.

He tossed it to the floor.

He said, "I hate a man that talks and talks and never does anything."

The kid lay belly-flat on the floor and peered at the slowly revolving knife from a lank ambush of hair. Bender saw the great conflict in him—the will to destroy opposed by the instincts of heritage. At a rough guess, it would be no more than a day or so before the older instinct took full command.

Bender said experimentally, "I thought it would be that way. I never saw a crying man yet that wasn't yellow as a carp's bay window when it came to the test."

The kid reached for the knife and rose up on his haunches all of a piece.

Bender's laugh was like torn flannel. He had gauged the distances to a nicety, and now he swung the green pelt in a hard, cross-wise cut that laid the wet

shank solidly against the kid's eyes.

The fallen knife twirled like a wheel of fortune.

Bender stood over the blinded kid and said softly, "I wish you'd go back to that girl with the mustache, son. Anybody could see at a glance you and her would make a cute couple."

"I'm going to get you, Bender," said the kid.

"Right now," said Bender, "you're going to get to bed. You know, kid, sometimes I don't see much of a future around here for you."

THEY slept in bunks on opposite sides of the room, sharing perforce a crude intimacy neither of them liked. Bender lay log-still in his bunk and made a great to-do with his breathing, but his open eyes smiled into the firelight. He waited.

The coals shuddered down to a violet sludge, and away to hell and gone out in the timbers a wolfsong broke in bitter flakes of sound. It was a haunted cry, hopeless with yearning. That one would be in a Victor before sun-up, thought Bender.

He still waited.

The kid's Rockford-clad feet swung softly to the floor and his set teeth shone in the dark.

He listened carefully to Bender's thick breathing. He took two steps toward the fallen knife.

Bender's eyes still smiled. Under the gunnysack that cushioned the knife was a jump-trap set on a hairline edge so that it would take the kid somewhere above the wrist. It was a trap built for heavier game than the kid. It had teeth.

The kid came to a stop.

His Rockfords shifted indecisively—this way, that way—and Bender heard a pulled finger creak at the knuckle-joint. Almost he respected the kid at that moment, not in any personal sense but as he would have respected a canny old coyote swinging wide of the bait.

The kid lay down in his bunk again and Bender lost any sign of respect for him. It had not been caution, after all; it had been a triumph of heritage over hate.

"God!" the kid mumbled into his blanket.

And wept again, the fingers of one hand sliding across the floor.

At sunrise the trees were white with a powdery snow that fluffed out like a girl's hair, light and vivacious, at every turn of the wind. Bender spread the burlap curtains and swore through his teeth.

"Wind on top of a powder snow. That does the thing up brown."

The kid said with eager wit: "Up white, you mean, don't you? Ain't much of a wind, though, is it?"

"A Stick Indian could have blown on his knuckles and it would have been wind enough to foul every set in the line." Bender hiked up his mackinaw collar and cached a new vial of scent in one pocket. "I'm taking the Springfield along today. The Winchester'll be up there in the rack if some pesky traveling salesman drops around to sell you a safety razor for your girl friend."

The kid whitened. The kid said, "How come I ain't going along?"

"After what's happened, maybe I'd hate to get between you and the sun."

"If you wouldn't ride me, Bender. But you ride me. All the time you—"

Bender turned slowly, the heavy Springfield slung through the crotch of his arm. "Or maybe," he said, "I'd hate to have you get between me and the sun. After all, kid, your back hair parts in the middle just like mine."

He kept his eyes on the kid's drawn face. "But you never looked at it that way, did you? You're like the old blister up there in the picture—it don't occur to her that maybe Hattie is quite a fireball in her own right."

"Lots of people know I came up here with you, Bender."

"Let's neither one of us worry about that part of it. If something happened to me, now, or—well, let's say to you—I don't think there'd be any trouble with the sheriff. Ask me why."

The kid looked down at a ringlet of bacon rind on his plate.

"Why?"

"Wolves," said Bender.

The bacon rind crumbled under a tentative forefinger.

Bender said, "Men have disappeared

up here before. One of them was the government trapper that threw up this very hutch. See what I mean, kid? Nobody asked very many questions, and I wouldn't be at all surrounded if that's how it turns out again."

"Again?" shrilled the kid.

"If anything," Bender told him, "happens to me."

He put one hand to the crosspiece of the door. Turning as if in afterthought, he let the Springfield draw a casual figure on the kid's shirt-front. The kid shrank like a partridge.

Bender added gently:

"Or to you."

CLOSE on mid-day he brought up at last to the dull arc of blood. The snowfly had come with early dawn, crossing his sets so that the bottle of lure had had to be uncorked a dozen times along the way. But there had been, he remembered, a wolf that wept before dawn.

The wolf lay now and looked up at Bender out of eyes too sickened to care. His forepaw hung by a worn tendon. He was far gone.

"Ah," said Bender. "Would you, now? Would you?" He circled the wolf and set his sights for an ear-to-ear shot that would leave the thick pelt undamaged.

The Springfield had a heavier rebound than the kid's Winchester—a long one like a snake striking from the grass. Used to the light rifle for close-in work, he had forgotten to harden his heels when he shot. The butt-plate caught him high in the chest, and wolf and man dropped as one.

Bender cut one hand across his muddy flanks and decided that he would, as a matter of policy, bat the kid's ears down tonight. Let the kid go back for the carcass. Do him good.

He left the dead wolf slung across the trap and walked in his own footprints up through the aisled timbers.

The forest steamed now, fragrant with thaw. The wind's soft fingers wove a lace of unrest on the air. So absorbed in the effect he did not look for the cause—though it was all around him then: in the tissue of his garments, in the pores of his skin—Bender knew a hate of the forest as sudden and devouring as his hunger of cities. On Yesler Way at this moment, thought Bender, there were girls who walked in the rain.

He was one with the wolves, though he did not know it then. He had been one with them from the moment that he and the trapped wolf had fallen together.

Now they came out of the underbush behind him, the wolves whose unrest he shared—and he saw them.

There might have been a baker's dozen of them in the salal and salmonberry growth downslope. Or more. With the steel wool of February in their ruffs, it should have been an easy matter to tell: but it was never easy. They had a trick of lengthening their thews to fit the leanest shadow.

He was not afraid. In times of natural meat rationing a timber wolf could be as voracious as anything on four legs or two, but nature issued no ration cards in this fat land. And the wolves, Bender saw, were moved by some impulse less cogent than hunger.

The Springfield knocked at his ribs. He drew a fine comb of lead through the brushes below him, letting his body swing with the rifle until his opposite haunch sat on the opposite heel. Once and no more a thicket burst with movement. That was the harvest of the whole enfilade—a dead or wounded wolf.

Bender's hand went back to his mack-

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inaw pocket. It came out empty as the breech of the Springfield, and Bender damned the wolves and himself.

He had long since learned that a woodsman sketchily girt for his day invites the cruelest ironies of nature. But who was to say he had been sketchily girt? A double handful of Springfield cartridges should have scattered the pack to the last outpost of hell. There was no precedent in his experience for the conduct of these particular wolves.

They had come out of the thickets already. And they were following him again.

Bender struck off the trail at a sharp tangent. He drove the rifle stock into a patch of chert rubble and set it raining down on them.

"Beat it!" he told them. "Now beat it, damn you!"

One of the wolves in the vanguard showed teeth cleaner than any hound's. As at a signal the pack formation tightened: it was an arrow now, drawn and aimed. Bender knew fear at last.

For wolves would not always resolve themselves into precise chemical formulae. In quantities too great for their blood to endure, the same excitant that drew them to a trap had been known to set them on the trapper himself—killers appeasing one instinct in the hysteria of another. Or so he had heard.

And Bender's fingers had found the sticky wet stain across his flannel shirt front. A full half hour he had been live bait, steeped in the essences of the broken vial. And the wind was blowing and the wolves were mad, and there were no more cartridges for the Springfield.

HE HAD known fear only as a craftsman knows one of his tools. Now that the tool had turned in his hand, he had no talent for the other end of it. It cut across the nerve-centers that govern instinct as well as reason.

Bender whooped his panic and set at a hard run up-trail.

The wolves understood him well. They had been not quite certain the moment before; now they were certain. They came.

The cabin was lost in folds of distance, four miles to the south over broken country where even the timbers lurched and grappled for footing. He could not make it. He was about to die. Bender saw that at last and accepted it almost with courage.

He used the Springfield as a crutch and swung about-face at the first solid hold for his heels. He had shed his mackinaw along the way. Now he made a ball of it above his head and threw it hard down the wind.

The old wolf at point shook his wintry flews and gave it wide clearance, not to be diverted by any new vagary of the senses. The senses overwhelmed the wolf. He sharpened his muzzle at a crossing of the winds and cocked his head sideways to covet the reeking bait.

The wolf crept warily toward the mackinaw. He raised his lip in a meeching smile and salaamed to it, servile as Heep. He toppled suddenly across it and began to roll.

Bender let hope and folly drive through him together. He ran again. Two of the young wolves veered into the timbers and paced him jovially, though Bender did not know that until he stopped to ease the thin white pain in his lungs. They were below him then, laughing up at Bender.

Their eyes shone lambent in the shadows of the spruce.

"No!" said Bender.

Bender screamed, "*No!*"

He had only time to shrug out of his shirt and his uppers. The gust accepted them from Bender's fingers and spread them enticingly before the wolves.

Naked down to his belt-line, Bender caught up the rifle and went on. He did not run again. He was infinitely careful not to do so, holding his muscles to a stroller's gait that exhausted him more than headlong flight would have done.

THERE is always the wolf that runs alone. His way is that of the pack by preference, but only so long as it conforms with the way of the individual.

He came out of the timbers ahead of Bender. They met face to face on the downhill jog.

He was an old wolf with the tempers but not the infirmities of age. He was fully a wolf and a quarter in length, and his muscles coiled with conscious power under his thirty-dollar pelt. He sneered at the half-naked man with the empty gun.

In the sneer was the whole history of his dislike for this man, conceived at first sight and growing with the leaps and bounds that had borne him up-country to head Bender off exactly where it would hurt the most.

The wolf wove sideways and came in low. He struck so suddenly the man had no time for despair.

Bender swung the Springfield straight and hard, driving with the butt-end of it. The mattress of leaf-mold resounded dully. He had thought that the wolf would try for his bared throat. The strike was at mid-thigh.

The wolf worked his fangs in Bender's left leg and braced his hindquarters, pulling. He was like a spiked jump-trap that whips its prey backward with the tension of the chain.

Bender put the gunstock to the wolf in a blow that loosened the wolf's teeth and his own. He had aimed it for the flat wedge of skull. It caught the wolf amidships and bent his ribs inward so that two of them were grating when he rose.

He did not whimper.

Bender whimpered: "I'll kill you."

The wolf's eyes understood and doubted. Tight over the man's thigh was a hand—red with lost strength. And the man would need strength as badly as he would need two hands for the rifle.

Bender held the rifle in his two sweaty hands. He plied it as bar and balance-bar—a totem against the wolf before him and the suck of gravity behind. The country took an easier fall here, swooning gracefully into its pillows of mist. But the cabin was drawn into deeper mists: and the way was backward for Bender.

The wolf walked wide of ha-has in the slope. He made no effort to deprecate his hurt. The two broken ribs ticked under his pelt, and once he turned his sharp nose into them and probed as with a scalpel. But the glance he bent on the man was clinical and sure.

It went from the man to the trail of

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blood that wound from the man, a graph of sinking endurance as legible to the wolf as to Bender.

"Kill you!" Bender told him. "Kill you!"

He hugged the Springfield to his damp chest and found a stone with his freed hand. He had the best of luck with it. It bounded from the wolf's broken ribs.

The wolf settled himself down in the boscage and put his muzzle between his paws. Agony burned with a candid green light in his eyes.

"Ah," said Bender. "Would you, now? Would you?"

He ran again, thumping the gunstock into the slope and letting his body roll when roll it must.

Half a mile downgrade, the wolf came out of the spinney to his left and looked sagely at the thickened stain underfoot. The wolf's ribs were poulticed with mud. He had even had time for that.

The wolf smiled at the man.

The man howled at the wolf.

THEY came to a point in the trail where live rock flumed the course of a long-dead stream. The wolf struck again here, weaving and feinting like a boxer.

Bender swung his weapon again. His hands were wet on the rifle barrel and then impossibly empty on it—the Springfield drove its stock into a tree! The wolf and the man looked at the man's open hands.

Bender threw out his arms and went backward into the coulee.

The wolf caught at him as he fell, wanting to hold him there. The wolf's teeth shut on the rawhide lace of Bender's left boot, and the life of the rawhide measured strange war between wolf and coulee. Bender swung head downward, to be hurt by one or the other.

The wolf gave him up to the coulee, and the coulee rolled him and romped him and spread him face down in a cradle lined with stone.

Through his filmed eyes Bender saw the carnelian among the stones, worn to a dusky gloss by the waters of yesterday. It held all the fire and beauty of life in its veins: dear beyond words to him now that the gift of the forest had turned out an Indian gift. It was like the flesh under a well-drawn fur, that carnelian, thought Bender.

He drove his great new vigor into his hands and watched them go forward and flatten on the gravel bed. The gravel had moved only a little. The man moved not at all.

The hands lay dead and empty, obeying the will no more. And the wolf had come down into the coulee to reclaim the man.

THE kid's outcry was a soundless yawn back of the rifle barrel. The rifle caught a point of light that ran toward the kid's narrowed eye with every spank of a cartridge.

Bender and the wolf looked up at him in unison and in wonder.

The kid crouched yonder side of the coulee, his Winchester laid in the deep V where two boulders put their heads together to fashion a natural rifle pit.

Less than a quarter mile to southward the starving fire raised a question-mark of smoke. The kid's nose wept. Patently, he had waited long in ambush, his rifle set either for Bender or for the rancid old sleepless bear he had been assured a .22 cartridge would stop.

But probably for Bender. Around the kid's left arm was a thick red bandage that turned Bender's thoughts to the wolf-size knife he had left behind him over the pan of the jump-trap.

And in the last analysis, the bruised and bloody kid could not seem to kill the man. He was shooting the old wolf for all he was worth, and at that range no one could have missed.

The wolf went up to the unresisting man and took him carefully by the throat. His instincts may have told him what the man's brain knew—that there was no powder in the kid's cartridges.

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CHAPTER ONE

Death at the Mission

IT WAS the time of warm, langorous days and first frosts at night. The brown hills cried for rain, yet a month away, and valleys lay sere and fallow under the sun. It was not by accident that Friar Robusto, rare combination of saint and devil, should be enjoying the hospitality of Mission Santa Ysabel at this season. For jolly Father Gozo, beside his genius for catering to the spiritual needs of his flock, was perhaps the best feeder in California.

After the prohibitions of the hot season, fruits of the nearby ocean were again flowing to the mission table. There were oysters and clams from the Bay of Pearls, abalones and mussels from Vaca Marina, Sea-Cow Rock, eels from Punta Gorda Shallows, and tasty pompano from the tide flats at the mouth of Rio Santa Ysa-

His words tailed out into a shrill scream as Robusto knocked him off the narrow ledge. . . .

bel. What was a three hundred mile walk for Robusto? A poor price indeed for the joys of Gozo's shore dinners!

Robusto had now been ten days with Father Gozo, gorged to repletion, rested and made at peace by the genuine laughter of his host and the unfailing hospitality of the mission personnel. But now the old restlessness was growing in him, and his blood cried out for the stimulus of adventure. And, as if the gods had heard his cry, adventure came to sleepy Mission Santa Ysabel.

Robusto and Gozo were sitting in the cool garden, under the umbrella trees, tempting their appetites with tiny, tasty oysters immersed in Gozo's own sauce recipe.

Gozo had just said: ". . . and then, my dear Robusto, you add a pinch of—" when there was a crashing amidst the vines atop the high adobe wall and a man

fell inside—a brown-skinned, almost naked man who cried piteously as he sprawled among the thorny tendrils.

Gozo dropped his dish and stoop up, staring. "Blood of the saints!" he barked hoarsely. "What foul work is this?"

It remained, however, for Robusto to put aside his oyster, smash his way into the tangle, lift the squirming man and carry him into the shade. He laid him there on the flagstones. "He is an Indio," he said, and stood back. "His skin burns with fever, and he is near death."

Gozo cried: "Sootam, old friend," and fell to his knees beside the stricken Indian. Several times he called the name: "Sootam! Sootam!" But the man had lost consciousness. Gozo turned hurt eyes up at Robusto. "Look at him," he mourned. "Look at the long, fiery wounds on his back and legs. What devilish ordeal has he suffered?"

"He has been beaten," said Robusto. "Whipped with a lash. Who is he?"

"Sootam, head man of the Atsamas, at Rancheria Jabatka. A Christian Indian, who has led his people into the true faith. The Atsamas are a peace-loving folk, friendly to all. It is Sootam's boy, a fisherman and pearler, who brings the sea food here, every second day. What in the world could have happened—"

"These hurts," said Robusto, fingering the ragged edges of the back wounds, "were made with a *cuerta.* Could he have perhaps stolen a beef? Could vaqueros have punished him?"

Father Gozo shook his head, although a light flared in his dark eyes. "It is not the theft of beef," he said, thoughtfully. "For, while he might steal if hunger tormented him, there is now no need."

"Hides?" asked Robusto.

"Hides for the traders, whose ships rest with furled sails in the Bay of Pearls. And meat for the Atsamas. Like the buzzards, Robusto, these Indios are gorged with the carcasses the *rancheros* pay them to drag away. And the lines are heavy with *charque,* in their pearling rancheria at Totacala, at the mouth of the Santa Ysabel. But the crewmen of the hide ships—Godless men, might have ventured into the rancheria for girls. . . ."

"Or pearls," added Robusto.

"Or pearls," nodded Gozo. "Though the Indios dispose of the pearls as fast as they find them, never many and quite small." He scratched his head, puzzled. "None of this seems to be the answer. Sootam has been ailing, staying very close to his house, at Rancheria Jabatka, not far from here."

As Gozo talked, the Indian showed signs of recovering his senses. At the father incumbent's clapped hands, a lay brother ran for a dipper of cool water at the *olla.*

Robusto helped Gozo lift Sootam to a sitting position, helped him to drink. He said: "We are your friends, Sootam. What has happened to you?"

The Indian turned his filmed eyes up, struggling to collect his thoughts. His face was a mass of welts, left by the voracious hordes of slough mosquitos. He sighed, weary and bewildered.

"I go to join my fathers," said the Indian. "God have mercy. . . ." He clutched at Father Gozo's crucifix, pressed it to his lips.

"Lift him up, Robusto *mio,*" said the father incumbent. "We must get him into a bed, wash his wounds and apply healing unguents. Brother Tomás, prepare a bed. And bring brandy."

"Do not trouble," said the Indian, weakly. "I am dying. Here. . . ." He opened his clenched fingers and a few small coins dribbled to the flagstones. "Light candles for the rest of my soul—and pray for the damnation of those who have robbed me!"

He paused for breath and Robusto saw that tortured body sway, caught it and lowered it. "Who robbed you, old man?" he whispered.

Glazing eyes stared upward. "El Prodigo!" It was little more than a sigh. "He robbed me of my three precious pearls. His men beat me until they believed me dead. . . ."

His finger leveled at nothing at all and some inner fervor put strength into his voice: "You stand there laughing at me, El Prodigo. But you will not laugh long. I shall return to torment you."

He gasped and lay still. Gozo said: "Hurry, we must get him in bed."

Robusto lifted the limp, mahogany body, stood holding it, making no move toward the door. Very bleakly, he said:

"He is beyond your Samaritanism, Padre Gozo. He is dead."

"WHO is El Prodigo?" asked Robusto, after the body of Sootam had been boxed and loaded on a *carreta* for return to the rancheria on the morrow.

Gozo pursed his lips, slowly shaking his head. "How will we pick out one among so many squanderers?" he asked. "It is the plaint of all our *viejos* that among their sons is none with the ancient hardihood that built this fruitful land out of a wilderness; that the young ones are riotous and lustful and spendthrift. Many I could name who deserve the title, El Prodigo. *Quien sabe?*"

In Robusto was a growing, grim aggressiveness. "I find myself very curious, Padre," he murmured. "I find it unbearable not to know which of the prodigals you mention might have stolen Sootam's three precious pearls and whipped him to death in payment. If you would be kind enough to prepare a list, I will investigate each one. . . ."

Gozo held up a restraining hand. "Nay, it is not seemly that a friar interest himself in such matters, Robusto. That is the business of the sheriff."

A queer little smile edged the padre's lips. "I am reminded now that Sheriff Conrado Aragon himself would head such a list as you ask me to make. He, of all the others, is Santa Ysabel's horrible example of a spendthrift and prodigal. While yet a boy, he inherited the great Punta de Dardo Grant from his father, let the business run itself while he wasted his heritage, drinking, gambling and bringing dishonor upon the Aragon name."

"Then, by all odds, the sheriff should be the first one to investigate."

"Nonsense. The people here have always made excuses for Don Conrado, remembering his great father, Don Anselmo. They laughed at his early escapades, but wept when he matched his card game against that of one William Hafford, captain of one of the New England hide ships. For that night, on board the *Mary Hafford,* Don Conrado lost the Punta de Dardo, its lands, cattle, buildings and good will. And the people, to show their sympathy, made Conrado sheriff of Santa Ysabel, which pays him enough to feed himself and his horses."

"I think I shall call upon the sheriff," said Robusto very quietly. "To tell him of the death of Sootam."

"I sent him word of that at once," said Gozo.

"What did he say?"

"That he is far too busy to interest himself in petty quarrels among the *Indios.* Sootam, he said, was old and useless and lucky to have died in the church. He sent over a coin for a candle and word that he will meet Brother Tomás at Rancheria Jabatka, when he drives the body down tomorrow morning."

"Brother Tomás," said Robusto quietly, "will not be taking Sootam's body to its eternal rest."

"Wh-what's that?" Father Gozo stammered, half recoiling from the flame in the mendicant's pale eyes. He had never seen Robusto's eyes like this. "What do you mean?"

"When the sun rises, *mañana,*" said the friar, "*I* shall be guiding the funeral carriage toward Jabatka."

CHAPTER TWO

El Prodigo

ROBUSTO didn't hurry the fat, lazy horse that drew the rumbling *carreta.* He was possessed with a restlessness, spurred by the virus of adventure surging in his veins. But patience was both a pose and a virtue with him. With the early sun beating congenially upon his back, he seemed nothing more than one of the mission brothers dozing over the lines. But he was much more than that.

This was not the gentle, kindly man who had spent ten happy, carefree days enjoying the hospitality of Mission Santa Ysabel. Although at first glance, it would have seemed that those days just past had added materially to his girth, in reality, his midriff was as corded with muscle as before.

It was only that he had retrieved, from beneath the rock where he had cached it, that wide belt with the pockets, the weapons, emergency ration and certain articles of clothing which would have damned him,

had they been discovered, as that desperate *Salteador Espectro*—the Phantom Highwayman.

Yes, Robusto seemed to doze, but never had he been more alert to the sounds of the morning. Meadow larks warbled from the field, ground squirrels sat like picket pins, whistling at him. These were sounds the friar loved to soak up, yet through them came the sound he desired more greatly to hear, the faint tattoo of distant hoofbeats. He didn't turn to look.

A few moments later, a horse was curbed alongside the *carreta*. A hard palm cracked Robusto between the shoulder blades.

"Wake up, Brother Tomás. You should now be at Jabatka instead of causing me a lost hour. *Madre de Dios,* do you think my time so worthless that. . . ." The rider paused as Robusto lifted his face and fixed him with friendless eyes. "*Valgame,* the Capuchin! I thought—"

"—you thought to browbeat a lay brother without the spirit to talk back to you." Robusto studied the sheriff, finding him young and extraordinarily handsome. He wore fine, flashy clothes. His mount, a spirited *alazan,* as good as the best. He smiled at the scolding, and shrugged.

"I acknowledge the error, so enough of that. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Conrado Clemente Gilberto Cesar Aragon, high sheriff of Santa Ysabel. And you, who enjoy a hospitality mixed with the demand to cart Indian carrion to the Charnel ground, could do with a drink, I have no doubt. Permit me. . . ."

He handed over a beautifully hand chased metal flask. Robusto, fiercely antagonistic but equally curious, accepted the container, poured into the cup-like screw-cap and let the rare old brandy trickle past his tongue. Everything about this man suggested wealth and taste, quite the opposite from the comparative poverty of a sheriff's stipend.

"*Gracias,*" said the friar, returning the flask. "You are indeed a judge of fine *aguardiente.* A drink of this yesterday might have saved the life of the poor Indio in this box. After all, stripped of what he cherished most, he needed only something to color the wish to live, no matter how fleeting."

"A waste of good *licor,*" said Aragon. "He was an Atsama, his life worth little more than one of yonder ground squirrels. To such, life is a burden and death a luxury. Why should we mourn or regret his loss?"

"A cruel philosophy, Señor *Jerif.*"

Aragon laughed. "Not the philosophy of a decadent church, I admit," he said tartly. "But a realistic one, untinged with maudlin pity. Do we pity the beeves being slaughtered for their hides at Rincon de las Buitres? Not at all, my becowled friend. Those beeves do their part to make enterprising men rich and they fill the empty bellies of the buzzards." He drank deeply from the flask, dabbing at his lips with a silk handkerchief. "No, waste no sympathy, Capuchin, on this Sootam, who had outlived his usefulness. I can assure you that despite his long face and sorrowful preachments, Father Gozo believes as I do."

"And the one who robbed the Indian, and dealt him his death blow?" queried Robusto quietly. "By your philosophy, we should seek him out and extend our thanks for having fulfilled a humanitarian business, no?"

"That," said the sheriff, is like trying to save the life of a worthless Indio—wasted time. Having robbed the Indian, he must have his reward. Myself, I am too busy a man to be chasing across the countryside looking for men who rob the Indians."

Robusto ran his eyes up and down the man's brave figure. "What business might be engaging you so thoroughly? Surely not sheriffing."

Aragon's smile bleakened for a second. "My business is employing these lazy Indios who, but for me, would be content to eat their carrion. I encourage them to fish, to dig oysters from the shallows and work the shell for pearl. Maybe some day. . . . Ah, *quien sabe?*" He waved his *cigarillo* with a deprecatory gesture. "Who knows if they will ever amount to anything?"

"Who knows?" echoed Robusto, adding up the obvious reasons why this suave, conceited man might have beaten Sootam to death to secure three especially valuable pearls. "Only Dios knows señor."

"And He tells nothing," said the sheriff, tipping his wide sombrero with an exag-

gerated courtliness. "Adios now, *Friale,* I will ride ahead and prepare the Indians for your coming. Also I will learn what they know, the poor dumb creatures, about the injury to their head man."

He touched his prancing pony with the spurs and galloped away, displaying his horsemanship to splendid effect. And Robusto, looking after him, murmured: "You fall into a grievous and most common error, my friend. "God is not inarticulate, when one has ears to hear. And, when He speaks, sinners tremble."

THE Rancheria Jabatka occupied a fertile bench, below the rim of the mesa and overlooking the floor of the brushy Cañon de los Coyotes. A big spring, cool and pure from being filtered through native rock, boiled out of the talus and across the bench. From it radiated small irrigation ditches to patches of maize and melons, grain and fruit and squash. Houses of stone and mud and wattle, blended perfectly, hugged the headland, fronting a time-packed lane leading to the spring. Behind the mud-roofed dwellings stood idle *carretas* and implements for working the earth. The corrals, at the edge of the canyon, were empty. All these things Robusto noted as he dropped down the narrow road to the flat. It was not until he crossed the bridge of logs that he saw Aragon's horse, standing with dropped reins.

The sheriff came out of a house as Robusto stepped from the *carreta.* His face reflected puzzlement. He ran his eyes about, watching the half-wild, snarling dogs slinking near the brush borders.

"Not a soul about," he said. "Yet the dogs are here and everything remains as if they should be back any minute. I suppose they're all down drinking blood and gorging on beef, at Rancheria Totocala.

"What of the body?" asked Robusto, liking not at all the hot sun pounding against the top of the rude coffin. "Is it to be buried here or at Totacala?"

"What matter?" The sheriff shrugged. "If the choice were mine, I would dump it off yonder rim and into the canyon. Buzzards would soon make short work of it. But as long as you have it boxed, you may as well carry it down below and put the matter up to them. Again I bid you *adios.* Follow the road and you cannot miss Totacala. I shall meet you there."

Again he rode away and again the friar continued his lonely path. The hours sped past and now, with the sun setting, Robusto became poignantly aware of a number of things. The breeze was stronger, cooler, indicating a nearness to the sea. That breeze also indicated a nearness to the killing grounds in the Rincon de los Buitres, where the beeves were slain, divested of their hides and dragged to the hillsides where they were food for coyote, buzzard and Indian alike.

On the air was the vibration of the surf against the outer bulwarks of Vaca Marina —Sea Cow Island, off the mouth of the Bay of Pearls. Yonder, on the headland called Punta Gorda, Robusto could see the tiny figures of men, where they toiled with bales of hides, rolling them down to the waiting longboats.

Now the roadway broke away from the lowering banks of Santa Ysabel River and threaded a vast patch of brush. Fog rolled in from the sea and with the dying day all but gone, Friar Robusto came to Totacala. And was prey at once to the emptiness of spirit engendered by lonely habitations.

Here were none of the lights, cooking fires nor smell of cooking food he had expected. Here was nothing but a brooding loneliness and the faint scream of the seagull knifing through the distant beat of the surf. Up along the shadowed lane between the brush huts, slinking dogs ghosted to cover as Robusto's *carreta* clattered toward the center. And then, suddenly, a horseman shoved out from behind a hut, came toward the friar. It was, again, Conrado Aragon.

"Dios!" he complained petulantly. "You are about as fast as a turtle. I was about to leave, thinking you had decided against coming this far. Here again we have no Atsamas. Where are they? Your guess is as good as mine. One thing sure —I will spend no more time on them. Already I have missed my supper. I leave at once for the poor hospitality of Las Perlas."

"What of this body?" asked Robusto.

"Your problem, my dear friar. Whatever you do is well with my office. I have

finished my investigation and am satisfied that the Sootam came to his death at the hands of one of any number of petty *bandidos* who range the Santa Ysabel. As to the corpse, your quickest way will be to dump it amongst the rotting beef, yonder behind Rincon de los Buitres."

Robusto watched him ride into the gathering darkness, with tight-lipped intentness. "A very exciting fellow, Sheriff Conrado Aragon," he nodded. "Why, Robusto, should he ride to Las Perlas instead of returning to Santa Ysabel?"

"What will it earn you, Robusto?" asked his more cautious self, "to mix into the sheriff's business? If I read his eyes right, he will derive nothing but pleasure from hurling a mendicant into jail and throwing the key away. Take my advice, and return at once to the mission."

But the adventurous spirit of Robusto rebelled. "Your advice!" he snorted. "If I took your advice, I'd grow fat and soft, and the apostles of injustice would thrive in our beautiful California. Nay, I think I shall follow the good sheriff to Las Perlas. But first. . . ."

He went on a still hunt through the empty huts, finding in one a spoon-bladed shovel used in loading shell. The earth at the edge of town was moist from under seepage and the digging was easy. Even so, it was night and soupy with fog when the rude coffin was covered.

Robusto said a few simple words over the grave, replaced the digging tool, and took the road skirting the tidelands and circling the bay to Las Perlas.

CHAPTER THREE

Las Perlas

LAS PERLAS, a single line of adobe houses fronting a street at the edge of the bluff, was dark and quiet when Robusto came striding inside its borders. He had left the horse picketed a half mile back in the cover of the bosque.

Fog hung low and thick about the buildings, hiding the light splashing from a window and into the street until he was fairly up to it. Vainly Robusto peered for some hint as to what this roof housed. But the pane was frosted with moisture.

A tremor ran through the friar's sturdy frame, for he felt the spell of Las Perlas in this silent, fog-shrouded street, and that spell was evil. Purposefully, Robusto glided toward the doorway of this lighted building. A figure ghosted out to meet him. The click of a cocking gun, and a voice:

"*Holá, hombre!* Where would you go? Ah-ha, a friar! Las Perlas is a godless town, Friar, with little use for your preachments. What do you want?"

A face was thrust into Robusto's own—a face with flat nose, cruel eyes and unkempt hirsute appendages. This one, thought the friar, would kill for the love of killing as much as for the gold it brought him.

Remembering Father Gozo's caustic comments regarding this sinful place, Robusto said: "I come to see the don of Las Perlas, Talamantes Gil."

"What business have you with him?"

"The business of pearls."

"You have pearls?" The man snorted. "What would a mendicant be doing with pearls?"

"Does a beggar split hairs when an offering is made in the name of sweet charity? Take me to the great pearl buyer?"

Chuckling as if at some secret joke, the guard entered the house. A roar of laughter struck through the door and a moment later Robusto was permitted to enter. The room swirled with the smoke. At tables used to sort and evaluate pearls, men were playing at three card monte. Rough, hard-eyed fellows who showed only mirth now that a friar should enter these precincts. Their laughter followed Robusto as he was ushered into another room where Talamantes Gil was waiting, alone.

"Peace to your spirit," murmured the friar, and took the proffered seat across the board from this rich and powerful Spaniard, who made his own laws and enforced them.

Gil was tall and spare, his unlovely face scarred and cross-scarred with knife cuts. His eyes were unequal, as to both color and size, and the skin was stretched across his cheek bones, like the face of a mummy.

"I am honored, Father," Gil said. "I do not recall ever doing business with a man of the church. Now what have you in the way of pearls that you think might interest me?"

"I have no pearls," said the friar coldly.

"Your guard only jumped at that conclusion. I come to ask your help in locating three lost pearls."

"Lost pearls!" The eyes of Talamantes Gil narrowed. "Madre de Dios, Friar! A pearl is a pearl, as like all others of its size as two peas. Do you think they are branded, as with cows? Whose lost pearls?"

"Those owned by Sootam, headman of the Atsamas, at the *rancheria* of Jabatka. The thief believed he had murdered Sootam, but before he died, he mentioned the loss of the pearls."

"And you," Gil's lips curled in scorn, "like a scavenger, hunt the spoils of the dead?"

"Only to learn the name of the wretch who did this thing, my son. I hoped you might know the stones and the man who offered them for sale."

The pearl buyer shook his head. "Not possible. I buy many pearls from many people. I ask no questions. You might ask Sheriff Aragon, in Santa Ysabel. Or you might ask the Atsamas."

"Good advice," murmured Robusto. "Have them send the sheriff in."

"Eh—what's that?" The Spaniard half rose. "What talk is this?"

"The two empty chairs at the monte tables, Señor Gil. Was not one for the honorable sheriff, the other for yourself?"

"Most certainly not. You talk like a lunatic, not like a friar. Why would the sheriff be here?"

"Why else," countered Robusto, "than to sell the pearls of Sootam? Until the thief is caught and punished, all men are under suspicion. But you say I am wrong. Where, then, may I find the Atsams, to learn what they know?"

"How should I know?"

"You employ them to dig shell, no?"

"Oh-h-h. . . ." Gil spread his hands deprecatingly. "I pay them for what the lazy *pelados* do, which is little indeed. I have lost all patience with them. As far as I'm concerned, they can go back to the way they lived before I offered them a chance. I am arranging to bring in black men from the Bermudas." He bit his lip, as if regretting the letting out of this information, and stood up. "But enough of my business. Is this all you wanted to see me about? No word as to my soul?"

Robusto rose and gathered his robe around him. "Have you one, Señor Gil? I thank you, and bid you good-night."

He turned away, pausing only as he opened the door into the smoke-filled room beyond. Cards littered the table tops. But the players were absent, every one. Robusto's heart was speeding its tempo and his eyes were gleaming as he flung a look behind him. Talamantes Gil stood where he had left him, his skinny arms folded across his chicken breast, his thin lips twisted in a taunting grin.

The friar signed the cross as against the Devil, and closed the door behind him as he went out into the soggy night.

Now, as before, the evil of this place was an agony of impact against his mind,

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and he gave thought momentarily to the matter of his own safety. And as he paused there, keening the night for his proper course, a faint sibilence fell from directly above him.

A whispered warning: "They wait to kill you, Father Gozo. The rope end behind you is made fast. Climb up, but carefully, and I can guide you free!"

ROBUSTO grasped at this straw, knowing it might be a trap. The alternatives offered nothing but danger, without chance, so he groped for the rope end and, with characteristic litheness, walked up the wall. Now he found himself atop the flat roof, behind the adobe parapet. Small, strong fingers fastened the sleeve of his cassock.

"The rope now, Padre. We go down at the back and let ourselves down the cliff. How they will curse when they find their bird has flown!"

Robusto's arm went around the slender shoulder of a boy, trembling with excitement and eagerness. "Thank you, my son. Who are you, and how did you know I am in danger?"

"I am Soomut," breathed the youngster. "Son of Sootam, head of my people. I alone, of all those at Totacala, am free by the grace of *El Señor Dios*. But my soul is damned, Padre, for I have sworn an oath by Father Sky and Mother Earth, to kill, kill, until. . . ."

"Silence, such pagan talk, son." Robusto placed his palm over the youth's lips. "I am Robusto, a poor mendicant friar whose prayer is answered now that I have found you. Where are the Atsamas? I have been to both *rancherias*, only to find them deserted. What did you mean when you said you were the last of your people?"

Soomut rocked himself, his arms tightly encircling his knees. "All gone. They came in the night, with guns, kicking us from our beds and tying us with thongs. Men, women, children, all were taken."

"Taken where? Who took your people? Talk softly, my son, but tell me all."

The boy pressed against the friar, as if for much needed comfort. "It was the men of the human *diablo*, Talamantes Gil. He has worked us like slaves, cheated us and had our men beaten for stealing they did not do. When they had us all tied together they marched us down to the bay, like beeves going to slaughter, loaded us in boats. I worked my thin wrists free, jumped into the water and swam to shore. But the rest. . . ."

"Where did Gil take them?" asked Robusto, with flame roaring through his veins. "To the ships of the hide buyers?"

The boy nodded, choking. It was not a hard guess for Robusto, recalling Gil's admission that he was bringing in black labor from the Bermudas. Slaves, without a doubt. What more natural than the rough crews of the hide ships carrying on a growingly lucrative slave trade, hauling their victims both ways, around the Horn?

"By the blood of the Seven Wounds!" exclaimed the friar. "The foul business comes into the light. My son, did your father have three children?"

"Me," said the boy, "and my two older sisters."

"Did he ever refer to you as his precious pearls?"

Again Soomut nodded. "It was his joke. He said Talamantes Gil was welcome to the pearls of the bay; he would be content with the pearls of greater value —his children. When I am dead, Padre, you must not tell my father that I sold my soul for the blood of Gil."

Robusto pressed the boy to him. "Then you do not know that your father is dead?"

"Dead?" The boy stiffened. "Then they went to Jabatka, too? My sisters and I were at Totacala, drying meat. All were there except my father and a few old people, at Jabatka. I did not think the *demonios* had been there, too. Just another debt, Padre, to settle with Talamantes Gil. I hoped I was wrong when I said I was the last; now I know it is true."

"Come," said Robusto, drawing him up. "We will depart from this evil place. And you will speak no more about killing."

Together, they moved across the roof, toward the back. But the *vigas*, which supported the roof and which had uncomplainingly borne the boy's light body, creaked and gave a little under Robusto's heavier tread.

Beneath that roof was an instant flurry of movement. A door slammed, followed by the harsh, metallic voice of Talamantes Gil.

"*Holá,* Pablo! What of that friar?"

"*Dios!*" Pablo's gasp was clearly audible on the roof. "Is he not standing there at the doorway? Surely he has not passed, nor has he appeared to move since closing the door. . . ."

"Fool! Imbecile! Jackass!" Gil railed at him. "The one you seek even now moves back across my roof. If he escapes, you die—and those with you. Get him!"

The hunting cry of the man-pack knifed through the fog, and it served to sharpen the wits of the boy. "This way," he whispered, turning the friar to the side parapet. Over went the rope, which he had anchored to the chimney pile, and down it he shinned, whispering: "Quickly, Padre, or they will spit us like chickens."

Robusto followed him, found his hand at the bottom and was led angling across fog-shrouded lots. Behind them yells of bafflement and rage swelled loudly as the dangling rope was discovered. And the frantic injunction of Talamantes Gil: "Cut off both roads and pinch the cassocked beggar against the cliff."

Beside Robusto, the boy cackled softly. "Let them cut off roads, Padre. Let them pinch. We go down the cliff—this way! Quickly!"

Holding tightly to the friar's hand, Soomut seemed to plunge off into space. But he caught a ledge that angled down the face of the steep drop in sort of a trail to the narrow beach below.

Robusto, because of his greater size and unfamiliarity, was the slower. Behind him he could hear the clatter of pursuit raging along the rim, sounds that grew more distant as the murmur of the waves grew louder. And then, suddenly, Soomut had halted and pressed back against him.

"*Oiga!*" he whispered, and Robusto could feel him trembling. "Someone comes up the trail from the beach. And who could it be but some of the *ladrones* who bow to that *diablo,* Gil?"

"And already," came Robusto's tightly whispered answer, "others of Gil's men drop down the trail behind us."

Small pebbles, rattling down the almost sheer face attested the friar's statement.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aboard the Hell-Ship

"I HAVE led you to your death, Padre," the boy whispered. "God have mercy on me!"

"God," said the friar, "is merciful first to those who earn His mercy." And suddenly his strong arms went around the boy's lithe body, swung him out over the cliff and on around to a footing behind him. "We go down, my son, and without fear. Stay close to me."

Now they crept down the trail, pressing back against the cliff face. A faint echo of scraping feet grew louder near a blacker pool of shadow. With the cessation of footsteps echoes came, a challenge: "*Quien es?* Who is it?"

Robusto halted, laying his fingers against the boy's lips. From the man down trail came a second query: "Who is that standing there?"

Nothing could have better typified the fear these lawless ruffians labored under than the desperation in this voice, as if he had expected to meet a ghost and had met one. His answer came not from Robusto and Soomut but from Talamantes Gil, himself, at the cliff rim.

"Look out, Pablito. It is that wretched friar who meddles in our business. Hold him where he is. I have men coming to help you."

Relief seemed to touch the one called Pablito. He lunged forward, the blade of a knife glittering. "Friar, eh? Stand, then, or I shall slit your belly!"

Robusto, his eyes always like a cat's in the night, could see him now, and the movement of others behind him. He waited for nothing more. A roar guttered from his lungs as he leaped forward, his knife flashing from its sheath in his wide pocketed belt and out the vent in his cassock. His blade engaged that of his adversary. A quick test of might. Outmatched, the *ladrone* gave way, crying his fear. Robusto threw his body in close, nudging with his cliff-hugging hip.

The renegade, faced with being thrown over, gave the bulk of his attention to grappling this amazingly strong and agile friar. He relaxed his knife guard and Robusto thrust inside it, taking him in the throat.

The friar caught the corpse with his left hand, deliberately wiped the blade of his knife on the coat and then sheathed the weapon as the second *ladrone* asked: "What goes, Pablito? Have you killed the mendicant dog, or . . . *Madre de Cristo!*"

His words tailed out into a shrill scream as Robusto knocked him off the narrow ledge, using the dead one as a bludgeon. And then there was only one barring the way. He was turning, screaming for help, when Robusto caught up with him and brushed him into space. He too screamed and the night seabirds caught up the sound and seemed to hold it.

Robusto and Soomut hurried down the trail, the boy sobbing. "What happened, Padre? There were three men, with knives. If you were not a friar, I would be sure you locked knives with that first one, and killed him."

"The ways of *El Señor Dios* are mysterious, my son, and not open to question by mere mortals. Let us hurry before they overtake us."

"A miracle," murmured the awed youth. "A miracle saved us, Padre! Come, it is not much farther to my light *baidarka* that will take us to safety."

The narrow trail gave way to a sandy, wave-washed beach. The tide was out and on the firm packed sand the boy ran swiftly, guiding the friar to the skin canoe. Together they carried it into the sotfly-lapping waves, launched it and clambered in. It was an unresponsive craft, but well adapted to the surf, where Soomut handled it like a master. Soon they were out beyond the tumbling breakers, ghosting through fog that pressed suffocatingly about them.

SOOMUT rested on his paddle, maintaining silence as if listening. Across the water came the sound of oars rythmically beating the smooth water. Robusto chuckled acridly. "The fools who hunt a *baidarka* on the breast of a broad sea, with the curtains of fog drawn low! Let them pass, my son, then turn your prow toward Totacala. There I will show you the grave of your father, and—"

"This," broke in the Atsams youth, "will not be the men of Las Perlas but the cruel devils from the trading ships."

"But they row toward the mud flats, at the mouth of Rio Sånta Ysabel. What would draw them thither?"

"A few minutes' wait should answer it," said the boy. "If there was an Atsama left at Totacala, I could make a good guess, but. . . ."

The sound of paddles grew faint and after while voices sounded afar off. A laugh; a confused murmur of tongues, then silence. For a space of ten minutes that silence held.

Robusto grew restive. "Enough of this," he growled, and then Soomut's fingers were digging into his arm.

Again the splash of paddles, growing nearer as they came this time from the direction of Las Perlas. And presently a voice: "A palsy on that Capuchin! He robbed me of time and I am late. Speed those oars, sluggards. A rich deal grows cold while we dally in this fog. I'll skin you all alive if my buyers are gone when we reach the ship."

"Conrado Aragon," muttered Robusto. "What deal grows cold? What ship?"

"The *Mary Hafford,* once the hide ship of Wiliam Hafford, before he gambled with Aragon and won the Punta de Dardo Grant. It is said that Hafford, to show how generous of heart he could be, gave Aragon a deed to the *Mary Hafford,* for which he would now have no use. A storm dragged the ship's anchor and she went aground on the mud flats, in the bay off Punta Gorda. There for two years she has rotted, with only a caretaker aboard except when Aragon himself pays the wreck a visit. That, I think, is the ship he speaks of, Padre."

The craft, a ship's longboat, slid past in the fog, its bow-wave hissing and its oarsmen grunting as they strained against the thole-pins. The harsh voice of the Sheriff of Santa Ysabel sounded intermittantly, with another, softer voice answering.

"Talamantes Gil!" said Soomut. "He is with the *jerif.* The business aboard the *Mary Hafford* is evil business, of that we may be sure, Padre."

"Night business on the Bay of Pearls," mused the friar. "Not hides, for neither Gil nor Aragon own so much as one cow. It might be business concerned with the pale baubles taken from the shell of the tidelands. Or. . . ." He paused, hearken-

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ing for the argument from his more cautious self.

But it was Soomut who spoke, breathlessly: "Or . . . what, Padre?"

"Or the pearls of great price, about which your father spoke, even as he died, God rest his soul. Business on the *Mary Hafford,* with evil men haggling over the price of human beings God meant to be free. Your sisters, Soomut, and the Atsama tribesmen. If that be true, you and I must be allowed to enter our bid, no?"

The youth gasped, awed by the implications of the friar's suggestion. As for Robusto, it surprised him that he had not sooner guessed the game this Conrado Aragon was playing. Aragon, the squanderer—*El Prodigo* of whom dying Sootam had murmured. Having wasted his heritage in riotous living; having in substance traded his fortune for a worthless ship, he had now turned his lust for quick wealth and his genius for indolence into channels men have exploited for countless centuries—slavery. This evil, erroneously charged to the tough crews of the trading boats by Soomut, had its roots and branches aboard the stranded ship!

"Come," said Robusto, rousing. "Take me to the *Mary Hafford!*"

The quick way the boy bent to the paddle showed plainer than any words how eager he too was for confirmation.

Ahead of them, Aragon, Gil and their boatmen were boarding the *Mary Hafford,* their voices loud through the fog for several seconds, growing muffled and finally growing silent. A few minutes later, the *baidarka* scraped the barnacle-covered side of the hull.

Robusto whispered: "Stay with the canoe, my son, while I learn the truth of this business. When I call you, be ready for a quick leaving."

Taking the answer for granted, Robusto climbed the ladder like a monkey. And turtle-like lifted his head over the bulwark. Save for a faint glow from a cabin light the deck was dark.

He held his crucifix before him as he topped the rail, pausing there as a bony dog slunk away, snarling savagely, to vanish in the gloom of the main companionway. Expecting the brute to bark, Robusto poised for action. When silence continued to hold, he ghosted onto the

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deck, picking his steps carefully, keening the foggy darkness.

He rounded the end of a bulkhead and bumped squarely into a silent guard, who led out a gust of breath and swung his gun. The friar struck the weapon down and it hit the deck with startling loudness. Then he and the guard were locked in a death struggle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bath of Fire

FIGHTING without mercy, Robusto held the man's arms, drew his knee into the fellow's stomach and wrapped a steel-thewed arm about his throat. Lifting him, he endured the painful but futile tattoo of boots against his legs, until lack of breath brought fatal weakness. The man's struggles died and he died with them. Silently, without effort, Robusto carried the body to the rail and dropped it into the ebbing tide.

A few moments later he was staring into what had once been the quarters for the ship's crew. The bunks had been torn out and now the space, dimly lit by a smoky ship's lantern, was jammed bulkhead to bulkhead with sitting humans, men, women and children, old, young and the ages between. All were Atsamas; all bound.

Robusto must have gasped, for suddenly the silent, drowsing Atsamas were eyeing him intently, staring with the weary impersonalness. And, while Robusto stood looking at them, a small figure pressed against him; a hand found its way into his own.

"Forgive them, Padre," whispered Soomut. "They have lost the faith good Father Gozo armed them with for just such a time as this."

"I thought I told you to stay with the *baidarka*," scolded the friar.

"I tied it to the anchor chain," said the boy, unabashed. "There is need for another hand, now that the dogs have left my people unguarded. Let us cut them loose, Padre, load them into the two longboats alongside, and. . . ."

Robusto grunted assent, handing him the knife dropped by the garroted guard. "Excellent, my son. And silently, while I

watch to see that you are not interrupted. Go with God, my children."

He turned about and found the deck. As he glided along the rail, the echo of raucous laughter came aft, and the faint musical clink of glassware. Those sounds guided him toward the entranceway of the captain's saloon. At the mainmast, in a coil of sodden and well-rotted rope, he placed his cassock, his pocketed girdle, having first removed weapons, a disreputable hat and the black mask with the vertical white stripes which, according to a legend spread far and wide across the Californias, was the badge of that deadly, mysterious *bandido, El Salteador Espectro.*

So now it was the Phantom Highwayman who stood in the companionway, furtively peering around the bulkhead at the eleven men drinking around the big table. Each man had already finished one bottle of the potent sweet wine and was well embarked upon the second.

A swinging cabin lamp shone on the bronzed faces of the round-faced, bearded skipper of the hide ship and his four bronzed sailors. It touched the lust in the dark, avaricious eyes of Conrado Aragon and the deep-sunken deadly orbs of skeletal Talamantes Gil. It revealed the reckless dare-deviltry of the four pearlers whose weapons were in the pay of this precious pair.

Now Conrado Aragon tabled his glass. "Suppose we interrupt these pleasantries, señores, and get to business. Captain Smouse, your holds are filled with hides and you are ready to sail. You will have profits, *seguro,* but why not double them?"

The square-built New Englander eyed him owlishly. "How?"

"We have listened with pleasure to your tales of the slave trade, from Africa to the Indies, Señor Smouse. You have put ideas in our heads. We have gathered about a hundred slaves, which you will buy from us and deliver for the best price in the Indies."

The trader laughed and his men laughed with him. "Of all the fool talk," he boomed. "Slaves are blacks. There's no blacks on these coasts."

"True." Aragon was suave now, but

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cold. "These are red men, as good as any blacks, I swear."

"But my ship is loaded. I have no more space for cargo."

"These are not cargo. They will work their passage, making sail, pulling oar if you are becalmed, living on deck and eating beef they have dried themselves and which I will throw into the deal, as boot. Tons of it."

The captain stroked his bearded chin and Robusto saw him weakening. "A hundred, you say? Humph. It's a new idea and I see no reason why it won't work. *Humph.* How much a head?"

"Ten dollars, gold."

The skipper banged his palm down on the board. "It's a deal. Where are these slaves?"

"On board."

As if by signal, the eleven men came to their feet. "By godfrey, let me see the cattle and let us scheme out a way to get them aboard my craft."

Aragon and Talamantes Gil swapped glances. Don Conrado smiled. "This way, *Capitan,*" he said, and turned to the entrance.

A strange man stood there, pin-points of venom glittering through the vents in his mask. Aragon blanched, recoiled. *"El Salteador Espectro!"* he husked. "The Phantom Highwayman!"

"El Salteador Espectro," acknowledged Robusto, shifting his right-hand gun to cover the grim, inching advance of the softly cursing American sailors. "Sorry to interrupt so congenial and profitable a scene. But I bear you bad tidings. The poor folk you plan to enslave on distant, inhospitable shores are this minute being loaded into the longboats for return to their defiled homes.

"You, señores," his glance went to the watchful sailors, "who were being tempted, will be left here to return to your ship as best you may. The rest will accompany me, to answer to those you have so terribly wronged. Aragon, you first. And carefully, for it is blood I crave this night, not plunder. Move!"

There was no movement. Talamantes Gil exploded. "By the holy bones of San Pasqual, *El Salteador* is that Capuchin, Robusto!"

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